hero's shadow

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/24142522.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
僕のヒーローアカデミア | Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia

Relationships:
Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead & Midoriya Izuku, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead/Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Bakugou Katsuki & Midoriya Izuku, Midoriya Izuku & Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Midoriya Izuku & Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Midoriya Izuku & Past One For All Users, Midoriya Izuku & Sasaki Mirai | Sir Nighteye, Midoriya Izuku & Sensei | All For One

Characters:
Midoriya Izuku, Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Bakugou Katsuki, Nedzu (My Hero Academia), Takami Keigo | Hawks, Sasaki Mirai | Sir Nighteye, Sensei | All For One, Chisaki Kai | Overhaul

Additional Tags:
Homeless Midoriya Izuku, Vigilante Midoriya Izuku, Crack Treated Seriously, Parental Aizawa Shouta | Eraserhead, Parental Yamada Hizashi | Present Mic, Parental Yagi Toshinori | All Might, Midoriya Izuku Has All for One Quirk, Midoriya Izuku Has Multiple Quirks, Sensei | All For One is Midoriya Hisashi, Angst, Midoriya Izuku Has One for All Quirk, Midoriya Izuku is Bad at Feelings, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Angst with a Happy Ending, unless, Decapitation, Mild Gore, Suicidal Thoughts, Character Death, Boku no Hero Academia | My Hero Academia Manga Spoilers, Dying Midoriya Izuku, Bittersweet Ending, Overpowered Midoriya Izuku, One For All Quirk Haunted by Past One For All Users' Ghosts (My Hero Academia), Drowning, Self-Harm, Hurt Midoriya Inko

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of uneasy lies the head

Collections:
Dad Vibes, hey_look_at_all_these_hidden_gems, I swear to fried potatoes- these fanfictions are SO GOOD, Bnha Bookclub Discord Recs, RandomFanfictionsE.g.Anime_2BeRead, "no writing academia" discord recs, There are no words for this beauty, 僕のヒーローアカデミア - (読み返す [よみかえす]), my favorites, BNHA Fics, ⭐ Little Red's BNHA Library ⭐, Bnha titles that were definitely worth my sleepless nights, Quality Fics, Legendary Good Fics, Noumu/Experimentation/AFO Izuku Fics, Aizawa as a Parental Figure, Works Loved By Luna04, These BNHA Fics Are Novel Quality, The best of mha on ao3, Bnha fics that carved out a place in my brain, nonsense station's discord recs!, Yubi Heroic Bookshelf, Izuku and his Collection of Dads, Skelebooks (The Graveyard), call 911 for I have died at the sheer perfection that are these fics, BNHA_FICS, authors and fics that deserve all the kudos, soul healing comes from fanfiction, In-Progress I Want To Read, Mha Fanfics to read when done, Banco Fic, Shorts, Dadzawa Vibes, Ongoing Fics (bnha), BNHA Fics *chef's kiss* 💯💯💯, Wolfis MyHeroAcademia Library, .⋆˚.⋆.↩My Bebu multiverse♡♡↬.⋆⋆.˚⋆., BNHA Leer mas tarde, 📚 Fanfic Forum Discord Recs, Fics recommended by lunakaiii on tik tok, fuckin a, Fanfic_Recs_MHA, MHA_fanfics_because_idk, Writeass's favorite fics, My fav fics: best of the best, fics to sink your teeth into, Amaris' Favorite Ever BNHA Fictions That She Has Read More Than You Can Count, seer's dadzawa and izuku fics ☆, quetegustandebnh, What do you mean by Dad for One is not real? Just watch, Creative Chaos Discord Recs, Favorites BNHA⭐, mha vault, im hyperfixated as hell, Stalker's Amongst Stalker's, Vigilante! AU, Please how do I add fics to collection??, Izuku Midoriya Related Fics, bnha for the picky, Our Hero Academia!, Rereads157, Why does Johnny have so many soaps?, 📚 Wyrm's Fic Hoard 🐲, I need a good parental figure [read: Dadzawa] in my life, Sushi fics, CKFTR, dadzawa and his hellions, The VIP Section, Boku no Hero Academia Fics, Sad stories over 40k, 💙Dadzawa and other💙, MHA Fics that I think about constantly, Best of Dadzawa, Where Green Beans Grow, Best incomplete mha fics, Shit! I need to read!, Good and Intriguing AUs, Fanfics That Make Me Wanna Stay Up 'Til 3AM, Great long works, YAY cr a ck (stories that really hit the spot), Fics I Need to Read, Deadly Favorites, 💙 Favorite BNHA Works ⚡

Stats:
Published: 2020-05-12 Updated: 2024-04-06 Words: 859,870
Chapters: 92/110

hero's shadow

by feelingstabby

Summary

Izuku doesn't cry. He is a weapon, and weapons don't weep.

He won't cry until the battle, when he's falling through the air, when it settles in just how real it is that he's going to *die,* because yeah, the doctor warned him this would happen, but there's always been a part of Izuku that thought he'd live forever.

Just like his father told him.

Or, how a few heroes help Midoriya Izuku become something more than a lost vigilante.

Notes

i've had this one in my drafts for a long time, so here we go. this fic was created when i decided to take izuku and put him through the most horrific things to see what would happen. i wanted to see where it would lead him, and this is the result

See the end of the work for more notes

missed connections

Chapter Notes

> hey!! just a reminder to heed the CCNTUAW tag! i chose not to put any because of spoilers, so please assume that any of the archive warnings could apply!! if you're uncomfy with any of them, please do not read!
>
> also, just an additional warning that you should not expect a lot of comfort in this one. this is a tragic story, and it will end tragically
>
> ACT I: Chapter 1-19
> ACT II: Chapter 20-50
> ACT III: Chapter 51-77
> ACT IV: 78-92
> ACT V: 93-110

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time is a funny, funny thing. But it doesn't make Izuku laugh.

He drops from the air, hitting the ground with all the grace of a cat, and runs.

He should be commended, really, since he's choosing to run rather than fight. The two heroes chasing after him won't stand a chance if they catch him.

Well, mostly. He likes to think so, anyway.

Izuku adjusts his mask, securing it to his face as he weaves in and out of oncoming traffic and onto the sidewalk. Pedestrians shout at him and complain about the less than two second inconvenience he causes them while fleeing for his freedom, but Izuku is used to this. People are always ready to complain or call him an inconvenience.

Those words are old news to him.

He stops, finding an alleyway to turn into, and instantly realizes his mistake. *Dead end.* Shit.

The hero with the wooden body hops from the roof, landing in front of him.

Kamui Woods, Izuku's brain supplies. *Is this a bad time to ask for an autograph?*

Behind Izuku, Death Arms must've caught up. He can hear his heavy breathing as he moves to close him in.

"Give it up," Woods says, every word calm and carefully controlled. "You're cornered."

Izuku crouches down and grips the strap of his supplies backpack. Just as he's about to fling himself into the air with his powers burning through his legs to aid him, his breath is knocked out of him. He's thrown against a dumpster, and Death Arms is eyeing his bag and about to rip it away from him.

Pro Heroes, Izuku would like to say, are thieves too. Somehow whenever they do it, though, it's legal.

"Oh, hey guys," Izuku says nonchalantly. "Nice weather today, wouldn't you say?"

He leans back against the wall behind him, using it as support as he hikes his knees up and aims a powerful kick into Death Arm's stomach when he gets too close. Izuku darts past him while he stumbles in pain, momentarily distracted.

"I would love to stay and talk," he calls, "but I've got places to be and all! You know how it is!"

"Son of a—" Woods suddenly enlarges his arms to stop the boy's second attempt at escape. Izuku dodges out of the way and spins on his heel, only just having time to catch the meaty fist flying towards his head. He looks up and stares at the wide-eyed look on Death Arms' face, still holding the fist tightly.

"That was close," Izuku admits, slightly put off. He throws the arm back at him, shaking out his hand as the sting from the catch sets in. "You're good at scaring me, sir!"

Death Arms steps back and glares down at him, something like trepidation flashing across his expression. "Wait, he's just a kid."

I'm literally right here.

The wooden hero approaches, hesitant now, eyeing him a bit differently. He can't do a lot with his quirk in such a limited space,

Izuku knows. The hero specializes in support, not so much close combat. “How old are you?”

Izuku doesn’t see why that matters, doesn’t see how that will change anything. He takes a couple of steps backward, surrounded again, and raises his hand in warning. He knows to avoid hesitation, but he’s sort of curious now.

“Why are you chasing me?” Izuku asks, moving so he has both heroes in eyesight.

“Is being an asshole delinquent enough reason?” Death Arms retorts, and Izuku giggles. *I'd love this guy a lot more if he didn't just try to punch a hole in my face.*

Woods throws his friend an exasperated look. “You know why, Rabbit. Public quirk usage without a license, armed assault, vigilantism, attempted murder, and more things I can’t bother to name.” He wags a finger at him. “You’re putting a lot of people in danger, including yourself, and it’s illegal, kid.”

Izuku hums, feigning innocence. “Don’t forget grand theft and arson. I worked hard for those.”

Honestly, he doesn’t know why his client needs this bag so badly. He doesn’t usually ask questions if it doesn’t involve him, not unless he’s under some prior suspicions that they’ll hurt innocent people with what they request from Izuku. He learned a long time ago that when it comes to some people, it’s best *not* to know.

So he just does his little jobs and collects his rewards with his head down and his brain turned off.

That’s how he’s survived so far, so he’s going to keep it that way. It’s not like he’s helping villains. At the very least, the people he works with are other morally gray vigilantes with a desire to keep the world free of scumbags. They’re not going to tear down society as it stands like most villains work to do.

And besides, Izuku gets paid for what he does. He needs money to survive, after all.

The boy can’t decide if it’s better or worse than just stealing money and making victims of the super rich.

He still does that occasionally. Only when he needs to, though. But

this way, he earns his keep. It's work, even if it is technically dirty and illegal, and that's better than foster care or an orphanage or starving every night.

He's already experienced the last one before, but he's not ready to try his luck out with the other two. He's heard stories and even done his own personal missions surrounding the rectification of the fostering system.

"If you're as young as you sound," Woods starts, a bit softer this time —a compromise. "We can help you. Just turn yourself in."

Izuku knows it isn't that easy, though. He knows what the government does with people like him, and even if he doesn't get locked away in some high security prison like Tartarus once they find out who he is, he'll be tossed aside to fend for himself anyway, just with added leashes around his neck to keep him contained.

No thanks to either.

If Izuku is anything, he's fast. He snags the weapon on his thigh and fires, a thin black cable shooting out of the barrel and sticking to Death Arms' chest. Izuku reels the man toward him and steps to the side as the hero aims a punch in retaliation. Woods has to put up a shield with his quirk as his friend collides into him, sending them both crashing into the side of the building.

"It's been nice," Izuku says to them. He crouches down, preparing to jump again. This time there's no one to stop him, no interruptions. "But I have to get going. See ya next time, gentlemen!"

He flings himself up, his enhancement quirk—Boost, he calls it— sending energy in waves through his calves. His feet are about to touch the roof when wood bindings encase his ankle and yank him down. Izuku grabs the edge of the building and hisses as pain shoots up his leg. He twists around, pulling a knife from his shoe and throwing it in Woods' direction.

The hero deflects it, just as Izuku predicted he would, and the wood slips off his foot just slightly. Not wasting a second, noticing Death Arms moving for the fire escape to head after him, he digs a hand in his back pockets and pulls out a grenade.

To be fair, it's not an actual grenade. It just looks like one, with the same well-recognizable pin and grooves making up its features. It's funny. Izuku loves to see the look on every hero's face when they

think they're about to be blown to bits. It's *exhilarating*.

Maybe just a bit cruel, but hey, Izuku needs some form of excitement! He throws his homemade grenade, fighting back a shit-eating grin.

The second the bomb makes contact with the ground, there's an explosion of hot pink sludge and glitter. It rocks the earth for a moment, splattering both of the heroes and walls around them and sticking them to the floor, effectively immobilizing them.

"What the fuck!" Death Arms shouts. "Get back here you little—"

"Be quiet and help me find a way out of this," Woods interrupts, obviously the more level headed of the two.

Izuku is crouched on the building now, looking down at the scene. Both heroes are fighting, arguing with each other, and for a few seconds, Izuku wonders what it might be like to give up and let them take him in.

Maybe he'd go back with them to the police station. Maybe the heroes wouldn't recognize him for who he is. Maybe they'd give him a chance.

But probably not. The chances of that are low. Too low to risk. Izuku doesn't mind the way things are now, anyway.

Izuku straightens back out, turns, and doesn't look back as he leaps onto the next building and heads deeper into the city.

He's thankful that most pro heroes go easier on him once they see that he's a little younger than most. It's a bit insulting, sure, but he isn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

If they're going to willingly hold back and limit themselves in a fight against him, increasing Izuku's own chances at escaping, who is he to stop them?

After he drops off some of the stolen goods to his customers and collects their payments, Izuku makes his way into a warehouse on the outskirts of the city, where his newest clients are spread out around

workstations, kicking back with sandwiches and quirk enhanced beers.

Yep, you heard that right. *Quirk enhanced.* Izuku almost didn't believe it at first when he was doing some background checks on his clients and found that one of them has the power to turn any liquid into an alcoholic beverage.

Literally a Jesus quirk, which is ironic saying as the man with the power is anything but selfless. No matter, though. It's not Izuku's business.

His stomach gives a low growl as he walks across the mostly empty space, largely ignored by the crew. The sandwiches are looking pretty good to him right now. He hasn't eaten since… actually he can't remember right now.

He drops the bag on the desk in front of a man with a goatee, waiting with his arms crossed to receive his cut.

"You're late, brat," Mr. Goatee says as way of greeting. He picks up a stack of cash to his right, counts it, then hands a few bills to Izuku, who doesn't accept it. Not yet.

"That's half of what you promised," Izuku points out, voice slightly muffled by his mask. "That's not good business, you know."

The man snorts and leans back in his chair, leveling Izuku with a glare. "What are you, five? About time you learned life isn't fair." He tilts his head a fraction, eyes roaming over his disheveled look. "Probably should've realized that by now, though. And it's like I said, you were late. Real businessman know to always be on time."

Izuku feels his eye twitch. This isn't the first time someone has tried to short him. Adults can't be trusted to keep their word, or to do anything at all, really. Heroes or criminals, whatever, they're the same.

He lets the money sit there in Mr. Goatee's outstretched hand without breaking eye contact and lifts his chin.

"I was a little distracted," Izuku explains lowly. "Some pros were chasing me."

That seems to garner Mr. Goatee's full attention. "Heroes? Why?"

“Dunno. It wasn’t anyone too important, but they still weren’t easy to outrun.” Izuku shrugs, smiling under his mask. “It was just a C-lister and an A-lister.”

“An *A-lister?* Who?”

“Oh, y’know, the number ten pro hero.”

Mr. Goatee sucks in a breath at the mention of Kamui Woods, and Izuku sees a built of guilt along with fear in his shining eyes.

Izuku continues with a cocked head. “They were waiting at the spot where your supplies were, so either it was a trap and you knew that and sent me anyway, or someone else had the same idea you did and just spilled the information. But, judging by the look on your face, it sounds like they’re onto you.”

“Better hope not,” the man threatens, looking a little pale. “Because I know who to blame if they are.”

Empty threats. He doesn’t have enough men to waste on Izuku. Not like he’d bother harming the boy, either. The man may be harsh, but he’d never stoop that low. At least, that’s what his files tell Izuku.

Besides, Izuku will survive if Mr. Goatee puts him out. He has *plenty* of other clients, and not to mention plenty of rich people to steal from on the subways. He doesn’t like that last part so much, but he’ll do it if he has to, even if it does come with a small amount of guilt.

He turns and is about to make his way out of the warehouse without any of the rewards promised when Mr. Goatee calls after him.

“Just take the money, kid.” He sounds gruff, but Izuku knows it’s a front. “You look like you need it. But the next time you’re late you won’t get nothin', you hear? And for fuck’s sake, buy yourself some new clothes, you look homeless.”

Izuku smirks and grabs the entire stack of cash before the man can change his mind. He doesn’t stop walking as he stuffs it in his front pocket and heads out.

Sometimes it’s nice to steal for a living.

“So, let me get this straight,” the head of the police department says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. His eyes move back and forth between the two pro heroes in front of him.

They’re empty handed, and they’re not supposed to be. Both of them sit on the same bed in the medical wing while a nurse puts ointment on their injuries—apparently they ran into some bank robbers on the way back to the station.

They’re minor injuries, not even close to the worst they’ve had before, but still required by law to be treated.

“You two got bested by a teenage boy who jumps around the city in a cheap hoodie and sweatpants?”

Death Arms shifts. He sits next to Woods, obviously uncomfortable—with the situation or with the man’s tone, Naomasa can’t tell. Either way, the hero doesn’t speak up.

“He’s incredibly fast,” Woods says, sounding impressed. “And we stumbled upon him, really. It’s not like it was planned. We were expecting other villains.”

The officer sighs. “I figured you went easy on him. I guess I can’t fault you both too hard, as we’ve had pros on him for months. Every time they chase him around he manages to slip away.”

That’s my cue.

Naomasa steps forward from where he was hanging back and watching quietly. “I’m the detective who was assigned to Rabbit’s case," he greets, "and I’ve been keeping tabs on him for a while. I have to say, you two got closer than a lot of others have, even while going easy on him, so don’t beat yourselves up.”

Three pairs of eyes stare at him, so Naomasa decides to demonstrate. He takes out his phone and shows them the security footage he compiled together a few hours before.

He shows them videos of the vigilante jumping around the city with an occasional bōstaff that support teams have been *anxious* to discover the properties of. He also plays a shaky video of the boy stopping a

more recent mugging from the night before, only for him to turn the tables and rob the mugger.

“Let me introduce you to Rabbit,” Naomasa says as more footage flashes by. “He’s a runner of government property to sources in the underground. He constructs his own weapons with stolen tech from hero agencies all around Japan, and is currently credited with around thirteen agency break ins all around this district and the next. He’s a grand thief, arsonist, and sometimes, vigilante.”

“Whatever he is,” Death Arms grumbles, “he’s insanely strong. He blocked one of my punches like it was nothing.”

“And like you said, he’s working for criminals,” Woods reminds.

The detective shakes his head. “Most of his crimes as a vigilante are in favor of heroes. He’s never done any harm towards pros, and he tends to save civilians and aid us in villain fights whenever he can.”

The police officer turns toward Naomasa. “If we know so much about him, why hasn’t he been brought in yet? I heard Endeavor has a nice streak of catching vigilantes.”

Oh, Naomasa thinks sourly. *He sure does.*

Endeavor certainly does have a streak. The number two hero will take any means necessary to bring a target in, kid or not. There’s a reason most criminals are deathly afraid of fire after being captured by him.

“He’s harmless to heroes. He doesn’t do much. Bothering Endeavor with something so small will prove to be counterproductive.” Naomasa puts his phone back in his pocket, and when he looks up, the officer’s gaze is still set on him.

“Or maybe he isn’t,” the man argues, shrugging. “The Hero Commission clearly doesn’t think so. They want him off the streets. Gave the order this morning for him to be brought in, or else they'll send someone to do it for us in a few months.”

It makes sense, at least at face value, that the board wants him off the streets. That the Hero Commission wouldn’t want someone like Rabbit to fall into the hands of a villain or someone who might try to turn him against the pros. While he is a vigilante, Rabbit has never outwardly hunted down heroes. But with enough persuasion, there’s no telling if he’ll change those ideals of his.

Naomasa doesn't want that for the teen, but he also isn't sure he's ready to turn him over to the Hero Commission. He seems too young to become a weapon, way too young, and someone like Rabbit has no business at any kind of government facility.

"We should grab him soon," Woods speaks again, his face set in determination. "Faster he's here, sooner he's contained and safe from the villains out there."

"No," Naomasa interrupts. Their gazes are back on him. "We don't need to go get him. I already have someone who's helping me with the case." He shrugs, then answers the questions in their eyes. "He's an underground hero who's dealt with these types of situations before. If anyone can gain Rabbit's trust and make him stop, it's him."

"Not a terrible idea, I guess," the officer concedes after a pause. "What do you guys think? How long do you think it'll take for this kid to get captured?"

Death Arms huffs and rolls his eyes. "To capture one super-powered boy whilst trying not to hurt him too badly? Who knows. It's always the teens without a license that are the most slippery. So stubborn, too."

Naomasa holds back a snort. This is a child wearing pajamas. They're talking about a teen as if catching him will be the hardest mission ever. Sure, the kid may have outsmarted and outtalked all of the heroes sent his way, but Naomasa is sure this time will be different.

It's just convincing Rabbit to turn himself in peacefully that's the issue.

"Leave it to me," he orders, interrupting the betting pool going on about when the mysterious underground hero will drop the case after his inevitable failure. He turns to the officer. "You can tell the Hero Commission I'm working on it. No need to get Endeavor on his tail."

The man frowns and shakes his head, and no doubt he has a ready-made speech about the importance of listening to the Association, but luckily for Naomasa, he has a ready excuse.

"I apologize, but I'm going to be late for a meeting." He looks at the three men and starts to back away into the hallway. "You guys know how it is. I'll launch the operation as soon as possible, so there's no need to stress."

“Of course, Detective. Go on your way,” the officer says, but Naomasa is already out the door. He certainly doesn’t need permission.

Once he’s out of sight, he speeds to his office. His eye catches on the latest poster on the bulletin board on the way; Rabbit’s face is plastered on there, his mask and everything colored in, his face set in a knowing stare.

Erasing the mask and bunny ears on the hood, Naomasa can just see the makings of a troubled teenage boy.

He sighs. “Aizawa is going to kill me after all this.”

Friday nights are free breadstick nights at Tony’s.

It’s a small, family-run pizzeria that Izuku walks an hour and a half to get to from his apartment, but every second is worth it. Izuku loves the time alone when he gets there, and he loves walking into the restaurant where he’s treated like extended family instead of a homeless runaway.

No one at Tony’s tries to accuse him of stealing, and no one hounds him with questions about his home life or if he has anywhere to stay. They don’t assault him or treat him any differently, and for that he’s thankful.

At Tony’s it’s quiet, and it’s just Izuku and a few other people there at all times. That’s all he really needs.

Sometimes he still feels like he has a couple of missing pieces, however, like he’s somehow incomplete. He supposes that’s normal, though. Izuku can’t remember a time when his life felt complete.

Even when he was with his mother as a baby and everything was alright for a while, even when he met Kacchan and became best friends with him, and even when all of that was taken away and he became a vigilante.

Becoming Rabbit made his life fuller, brighter, more worthwhile, but it's still kind of lonely.

The five-year-old girl sitting across from him seems to feel the same way. The family is sitting a few tables away from Izuku, so he gets a clear view of the couple and their child.

The girl colors on the back of her menu with a pink crayon while the parents wait for their pizza, and she picks it up, flips it over so her parents can see, and smiles with all of her teeth.

“Look, it’s us,” she says, bubbly and bright. She points to each stick figure on the paper and names them, finally getting to the blob cradled in what Izuku guesses is the dad’s arms. “And that’s baby sis.”

“Baby sis?” Her dad asks, eyebrows flying to his hairline.

“Mhm,” she hums. She pushes her menu aside and snatches the one in front of her father, flips it over, and begins drawing another masterpiece. That one includes the nameless baby, too.

Her mother sighs, shaking her head fondly. “They were doing an assignment about siblings in class today, and now she’s convinced that *everyone* has to have at least one brother or sister. She’s adamant that a sister is on the way.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” the dad says with a cheeky grin, and the mom gives him a look.

Izuku hides his snort behind his own menu. After figuring out what he wants—he always gets the same thing, to be fair—he glances back over at the family, not able to help it. The girl’s mouth slants upward as she concentrates on her drawing, something Izuku knows people only do when they’re completely engrossed in their work.

Ms. Hanako, an older lady with soft blue hair and eyes that Izuku’s familiar with, brings the family’s pizza, along with what looks to be the girl’s second glass of chocolate milk.

Izuku lets his eyes fall over to the empty spaces at his own table. For a few seconds, he wonders what it might be like if *he* had a sibling sitting next to him, or maybe even parents of his own. Maybe he’d enjoy it, maybe he’d laugh at their conversations, maybe he’d tell some jokes.

But Izuku doesn’t dwell on it for too long, opting to enjoy what he has now instead of what he could have had. Or, more appropriately, what he lost.

He tunes in to the television on the wall, trying to get his mind off of the morning. It's always set on the news—partially because Ms. Hanako lost the remote a long time ago and won't pay for a replacement, and partially because the news is the least problematic thing to show these days.

"Best Jeanist has stopped yet another fiasco here in the third district this afternoon, and civilians are showing their thanks with—"

Same news, different day. Izuku is surprised there's no coverage on his chase with Death Arms and Kamui Woods, though he's not complaining. It wasn't exactly the most interesting or harrowing thing that's happened to him.

They probably don't want the public to know they let a vigilante go, also.

"Hey, sugar," Ms. Hanako greets, setting a water on the table. "Haven't seen you in a while. What have you been up to?"

Izuku notes the way her laugh lines crinkle when she smiles. She looks tired. "Nothing much, ma'am. Walked into a wall this morning, but I'm okay."

She clicks her tongue and shakes her head at his poor attempt at a joke. "You know, I thought that was a bruise on your face but couldn't quite tell. You've gotta stop being so clumsy, boy."

Izuku stiffens, hand coming up to palm at his cheek. "I have a bruise? Already?"

"Yeah, honey, right below your eye." She leans closer. "Tell you what, I'll bring you some ice after I take your order. How does that sound?"

Oh. She's too nice.

The boy grins sheepishly. "You don't have to do that—"

"The usual, I presume?" She doesn't wait for him to reply. "Extra order of breadsticks with a chocolate shake and two slices of pepperoni, coming right up."

And then she's gone, leaving Izuku to stare blankly at the space she occupied. The lady really is a blessing.

With nothing else to do but wait, he pulls out his phone and turns on

the camera, staring at the purple and black bruise on his cheekbone that stops right under his eye. Now that he thinks about it, the skin there hurts when he speaks. It stretches painfully across the bone, itchy and sore.

It really is ugly. No wonder he seemed to get more dirty looks than usual on his way here.

He pokes at it with a finger, only to immediately hiss in pain. Fucking *Kamui Woods.* If he hadn't grabbed the boy's ankle and caused Izuku to slam his face into the edge of the building, he wouldn't look like this.

Whatever. Can't do anything now. It'll go away in the next week or so. For now, though, he'll cover it with his hair.

Izuku really does need a haircut.

He plays Subway Surfer for the next few minutes, tuning in to his surroundings from time to time. The game is fun, sue him. Although it's slightly annoying to play because of how laggy his phone is nowadays. He needs a new one—preferably one he can make himself.

The bell rings, signaling someone walking into the restaurant.

Okay, but the dog in this game is pretty cute. I wish I could adopt it.

"Take a seat wherever, hon," Ms. Hanako calls from behind the counter. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Damn. I need more keys.

He gets a text from Kacchan, and Izuku can almost *hear* his explosive friend's voice through the screen as he reads the message. *Still coming over tomorrow? The hag bought you something.*

Izuku lets a small smile fall onto his lips as he replies. *Yeah. Might be late, though. Got another job.*

Kacchan texts back almost immediately. *Whatever, nerd. Just don't fucking get hurt again or I'll kill you.*

Bakugou Katsuki is one of the few people who know about his vigilante counterpart. In fact, he's the one that suggested Izuku become Rabbit in the first place.

An ice pack is set in front of him, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Ms. Hanako places the milkshake down as well. “The pizza and breadsticks are almost done,” she tells him, already walking to the newcomer’s booth to get his order.

When the food finally arrives sometime later, the ice pack is warm and the milkshake almost gone. He thanks the woman and digs in, groaning at how good it tastes.

Tony’s pizzeria never disappoints.

He finishes in record time and places a stack of bills on the table before Ms. Hanako can protest. She always insists he keeps his money, claiming that he’s way too underfed to have to pay for a little bit of food.

Izuku’s on his way out when suddenly the back of his neck itches, his hair standing on end. He turns his head to see the man who walked in staring at him. *Fucking creepy much?*

He has tired, sunken eyes, and his black hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail. He looks homeless, in all honesty. Dressed in dark clothes, the man gives off the vibe of a murderer. And given the fact that he’s still staring at Izuku *even when the boy starts to glare right back,* that little thought seems all the more probable.

But that’s not the most noticeable thing about him. Pushed to the side of the table is a large scarf, coiled in messy loops. It looks thick, like it’s made to keep the person warm—but it’s summertime, so why would anyone have that?

Shooting one last look at the probably-a-murderer, Izuku calls out a goodbye to Ms. Hanako and rushes out into the open air.

The library should be open still. He’s got about an hour before it closes, so he should be able to get some research done on his new targets.

Izuku’s heard rumors about a drug ring in the city over, and they’ve apparently got some good stuff. He managed to wean a bit of information from some of his past clients the other day, and that information had included a few names.

If he can access police records, he’ll have an idea of who exactly he’s working with. Or, more appropriately, *against.*

It’s not the first drug bust he’s done, and it surely won’t be the last. If

he can head straight to the library with no interruptions, he'll have just enough time before closing to get a location.

He's just about to turn onto the next street when a noise stops him in his tracks—it's a scream, sounding a little bit off into the distance.

It sounds shrill, and Izuku gets a sick feeling in his stomach. *Of course this happens when I'm not in costume.*

He slips into the shadows after debating for a moment whether or not he should just ignore it, ultimately deciding that no, he won't be a bitch. He uses his enhancements to jump onto the roof of the nearest building, leaping across multiple rooftops to get closer to the commotion.

The screams are getting louder now, and Izuku peeks down into a lot behind a convenience store to see a young woman struggling against a masked figure.

"What is *wrong* with you! Get away from me, I promise I won't tell anyone, just *please—"*

She gets cut off with a slap to the face, and Izuku grimaces.

His first guess had been a robbery, but now, looking at how Unknown Individual #2 is pressing the woman against the wall, Izuku can tell it's much more than that. And besides, it kind of sounds like the lady knows him.

No weapon in sight. *It's now or never, I guess.*

Izuku drops down from the roof and lands right behind the man, not making a sound. The woman lets out another scream once she sees him, only for Unknown Individual #2 to raise his fist again, an obvious warning.

"I thought I told you to shut up—"

Izuku taps him on the shoulder before he can strike, jumping back when the man instinctively swings at him. "I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

The criminal stares at him, lips curling up in disgust. Even in the faint light, Izuku can see the way the guy's eyes light up with something dark. "Listen, kid, you better back off while I'm feeling generous. This don't concern you."

“You know,” Izuku drawls, folding his arms and motioning for the woman to run, “you criminals have got to come up with something better to say when I start ruining your sick plans. I’m getting tired of hearing the same thing over and over again—”

The man’s generosity must be running dry tonight, as Izuku barely finishes his sentence before the dude is whipping out a switchblade.

I mean, he could’ve whipped out a gun or something. I should be thankful.

The woman gasps again on the sidelines, and Izuku gets the sudden urge to tell her off for not running when the man was distracted, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t know their situation exactly, so he can’t judge.

Now that he’s actually looking at them, Izuku can see that they’re both wearing formal clothes. They could’ve been out to a dance or club together, and one thing led to another. Are they married, or at least engaged?

The light’s too faint for Izuku to be able to look for a ring.

“One last chance,” the dude growls, bringing Izuku out of his thoughts. “Get outta here, or I’ll rough you up the same I did her.”

“That’s kinky.”

Izuku doesn’t give him a chance to respond before he’s on him, fingers grasping his wrist and tugging him sideways. The blade flies from his hand and clatters a few feet away, right in front of the woman.

Is that a phone in her hand—?

A punch to the gut has Izuku cursing, springing back into action. The guy doesn’t know how to fight, that much is obvious. He makes quick work of kicking him in the crotch and smashing him against the concrete wall, muscles burning.

The man slumps to the floor, unconscious, and Izuku stares at him for a moment, analyzing. There’s no recognizable features or marks on him, so he’s not part of a gang or league of some kind—at least, not one that Izuku knows. And he knows just about every single one in central Japan, if not all of them.

Digging in his pockets, he pulls out his emergency capture tape and ties the guy’s hands and legs up, putting a piece over his mouth just for fun.

“Um, kid?”

Izuku kicks the man one more time just for funsies and faces the woman who called out to him, frowning. “I’m almost fourteen. Not a kid.”

“Oh, sorry!” She says, walking closer on shaky legs once she makes sure the attacker won't wake up. There’s a bruise right below her eye, matching Izuku’s own sore spot. “Er, thank you for stepping in. You didn’t have to. He’s been harassing me at my job ever since he started working there last week, and he made me go with him to this restaurant today. I only went because I was being polite, but I guess that backfired on me.”

I was almost right. Dammit.

Izuku joins her under the street lamp at the mouth of the alleyway, wiping his hands on his pants. “Is he the one who gave you that mark on your face?”

She looks away, hiding her face with her black hair. She seems tired, and Izuku feels bad. “Yeah, but it doesn’t hurt too much. If he went any further I would’ve stopped him with my quirk, y’know? I don’t know why I didn’t use it before, but sometimes it’s just…”

“I understand,” Izuku says, and he does, really. Sometimes, even when you have the opportunity and power to do something, you still *can’t.* In those circumstances, it’s still not your fault. “But, hey, if you want to do something now, like kick him or something, I won’t tell.”

The woman laughs softly, relaxing. “Thank you again. I’m grateful, even though I don’t think you should really be out at this time of night. Anyways, I called the cops, so they should be here soon to—”

Izuku stiffens. She called the fucking *what?*

As if being summoned, a new voice cuts through the air, and Izuku can feel a familiar man’s presence behind him. “Midoriya?”

Oh fuck.

Two police officers suddenly appear a few yards away, irritation and confusion clear in their expressions. The guy who spoke rushes forward, eyes fixated on the boy. He has the face of a cat, which is the only reason Izuku recognizes him. And it may also be because he’s had to escape from said cat officer multiple times, both as Rabbit and as

Izuku.

“I swear, kid, this is the fifth time you’ve done shit like this!” The guy complains. “I’m taking you in this time, Midoriya. And don’t bother running.”

Izuku laughs nervously, escape plans already running through his mind. He’s not Rabbit right now, so he can’t use his quirks to escape. He’s just going to have to run for it.

“Hey, buddy ol’ pal!” He starts innocently, putting his hands up in mock surrender. “Long time no see! How about we talk about this first, huh? I mean, I did just catch that criminal right over there. That’s like, what, already sixty percent of your job?”

He points into the depths of the alley, and at Cathead’s nod, the other officer heads in to check it out. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Just come with us, peacefully this time, and then—”

Izuku spins on his heel, almost tripping over his own feet, and runs. He cackles maniacally as he hears the police officer sprinting after him.

And that’s how he ends up being chased through the streets for the *second* time that day. He only needs one more incident before the day ends to beat his personal record.

Izuku is fast, even without his enhancements. There’s not a lot of cover for him like there was this morning, though. There’s barely anyone out at this time of night, and—

Oh. He’s not gonna be able to make it to the library today.

Groaning, Izuku jumps onto the hood of a car and does a backflip, continuing smoothly down the middle of the road.

“Are you kidding!” He hears behind him. “Now you’re just showing off! Give it up, kid!”

Izuku just laughs and pumps his legs faster. The officer is still part cat, which is weird to think about, and therefore faster than average humans. If the boy doesn’t go any quicker, he’ll probably be caught.

I already have a few cases of public quirk usage on my file. What’s another one?

Izuku crouches down, feeling the familiar burn in his toes as he jumps up, using a wall as a springboard to catch the handle of a nearby fire escape. From there, he makes the final leap to the top of the random building.

He's so close. The officer won't be able to follow him up here—

He hears it before he feels it.

There's the rustle of fabric, so faint that it would've been nearly undetectable to someone else, but Izuku's been trained to pick out these sorts of things, so to him it may as well be as loud as a car horn.

Wind hits his neck, and Izuku twists mid-air at an awkward angle, his back arching almost painfully. He only just manages to miss the flash of grey fabric shooting his way, but the damage has been done, and Izuku overshoots the side of the roof and goes flying toward the ground.

He rolls clumsily, fighting back a hiss at the pain that shoots through his shoulder from landing on the hard sidewalk. His back hits a fire hydrant, and Izuku feels the breath leave him all at once.

Who the hell—?

A figure lands lightly in front of him, dressed in all black. Yellow goggles stare him right in the face, neon even in the night. The figure shuffles closer, not making a sound, and Izuku tries to conjure up some strength to get away, to run again, only to find that he can't. There's—there's no quirk to use? His enhancements are gone?

"Oh, fuck me," is the first thing to leave his lips.

Because he feels so stupid now. If the absence of his quirk doesn't give it away, then the large grey scarf certainly does. That, and the blazing red eyes.

That's why the guy at the pizzeria looked so familiar. Izuku's been studying underground heroes for the better part of his life. He knows *exactly* who this is.

The boy gulps nervously. "I didn't know Eraserhead patrolled in this part of town."

That's the wrong thing to say.

f

lies and confessions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What?”

Izuku immediately flushes, waving his hands out in front of him. “Ah, forget I said that!”

He’s an underground hero for a reason, dumbass! No one’s supposed to know he even exists, much less know about his patrol routes!

Izuku has probably just come off as a stalker, or worse, a villain.

Okay, don’t overreact. Chances are he just thinks you’re messing around.

Eraserhead blinks once, then twice, and Izuku’s breath catches in his throat when the underground hero bends down to lift him up by the back of his hoodie, setting him on his feet.

The man looks scruffy and tired. Not so much like the murderer Izuku had assumed he was just a little bit ago at the pizzeria. Pushing his goggles up, the hero scrutinizes the boy.

“You’re faster than you look,” Eraserhead grumbles, completely ignoring what Izuku said before. “That’s your quirk, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so.”

“You think so?” The hero echoes, sounding way too done to be having this conversation.

Izuku turns an even darker shade of red. He hopes the man can’t see it. “Um, I mean it’s part of it, but not really? It’s kind of like, um, well __”

Eraserhead cuts him off with a shake of his head. “Actually, forget about it. Come on. I’m taking you in.”

And *that* shakes Izuku out of his stupor. “W-Wait! Can you hear me out, first? I’m sure there are more important things for you to be doing right now, Eraserhead, sir. Like, er, fighting villains! Or, you know, taking in criminals!” Izuku is grasping at straws now.

“That’s what I’m doing,” is Eraserhead’s only reply. The man stuffs his hands in his pockets and strolls down the deserted street, obviously expecting the boy to follow.

Izuku digs his heels into the ground and tries to slow his rapid heart rate. He’s too excited to even be offended by his comment.

Holy shit. This is actually happening. I just met Eraserhead, like for real. I just met one of the greatest underground heroes to ever live and he’s currently arresting me—

“You’re not being arrested. You're a witness. Now follow me.”

Izuku obeys with shaky limbs, currently starstruck. So what if his file’s going to get even longer after this? It’s not like he has to apply for a college or job or whatever. He’s meeting one of his idols, so at the moment a fucking *meteor* could strike him down and he’d probably be okay with it as long as he gets to talk to the man before him.

I wonder what his favorite food is, Izuku thinks to himself. *I mean, I just saw him at the pizzeria, but I don’t think he ordered anything. He was drinking something, though. Might’ve been a black coffee. He seems like that kind of guy.*

“Are you hurt?”

It takes Izuku a second to realize the hero is speaking to him with his face turned just slightly to stare at him with one eye.

The boy flinches on impulse. “Ah, no, sorry! I’m fine!”

Eraserhead gives him an indiscernible look before turning away.

Alright. That’s not suspicious in the slightest. *Way to go, Izuku. Acting real pathetic.*

They come upon the cat officer, who Izuku guesses stopped his chase after seeing him get captured. He’s currently standing under a streetlight with crossed arms, and he steps forward once they get close enough. “Thanks for catching him, Eraser. He’s very slippery.”

The underground hero grunts, pulling a bottle out of his pocket and squeezing liquid into his eyes.

Izuku briefly wonders if he smokes. There’s no way a guy who looks like that *doesn’t.*

What's his plug?

"Midoriya!"

Oh, he's spacing out again. "Yes?"

The officer huffs, taking him by the arm. Izuku has to stop himself from kicking him in retaliation. "We're going to the station. Eraserhead here is coming with us."

"Ooh," he says, inwardly dumbfounded. He covers it up with a flourish of his free hand. "You know, I think this is the most fun I've had in my seven times of being arrested by you."

Cathead drags him along, hissing. Yes, he's actually hissing. Izuku shouldn't be surprised.

"The day I get to actually arrest you is the day I finally retire, and you can quote me on that."

"Don't you worry, I will." The boy swears he hears a small snort from behind him. Must've been the wind, because it just couldn't have been the emo hero trailing after them.

The walk to the station isn't long, as the library is only a few blocks away from it. He was heading there in the first place. Izuku can't help but smirk as he's led inside, and he greets the night shift employees with finger guns. They respond back with groans and muffled complaints.

Izuku counts that as a win.

"Stay here," Cathead orders, pointing at a spot on the ground. "I'll get the detective. Don't move."

As soon as the man disappears down the hallway and out of sight, Izuku spins on his heel to walk right out the door. He's done this plenty of times before. In all honesty, Cathead should have expected him to do this every time he leaves him unsupervised—

He smacks into Eraserhead's chest immediately upon turning around. The hero is standing in front of the doorway, looking down at him with tired eyes.

It's only been like a minute and I already forgot he's here. He's too quiet.

Deciding that he *won't* in fact square up to one of his idols—as he'd

surely lose spectacularly—Izuku takes a few steps back and decides to go annoy one of the other cops after quickly apologizing to Eraserhead. If he can't escape, then he has to wait. So, naturally, they're going to suffer the consequences of keeping him here.

He needs to water his fake plants. His imaginary fish need to be fed. He has to get at least a few hours of sleep tonight before his next task tomorrow. He has no time.

He's about to start bouncing off the walls—quite literally since quirk usage is permitted inside the building—when approaching footsteps cut off his train of thought.

"Why am I surprised?" Detective Tsukauchi sighs, strolling into the room with a cup in his hand. It smells suspiciously like coffee.

Izuku *wants it.*

"You really shouldn't be anymore," Izuku agrees, eyeing his beverage with malicious intent.

Tsukauchi sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Alright, you know the drill. Come with me, Midoriya."

But Izuku's already walking his way over to one of the interrogation rooms down the hall, and not even a minute later Izuku is sitting in that uncomfortable chair, waiting for the detective to come in.

All of this shit is making me hungry again. I wonder what Kacchan is doing right now.

Tsukauchi enters the room with a few papers in hand—Izuku's file, from the looks of it. He sets a new coffee on the table and peers at the boy. "Tell me what happened, Midoriya."

With an exaggerated huff, Izuku folds his arms and pouts. "Okay, in my defense, I was just going to the library this time, I swear. I was walking over and heard someone scream, so I went over and stopped what looked like a potential aggravated assault case." He jerks his head at the wall opposite of him, knowing that another interrogation is happening beyond it. "I'm sure she's telling your men what happened, so why are you keeping me here?"

Tsukauchi fixes him with a glare. "Because according to Eraserhead, you used your quirk to stop the fight, not to mention try and escape my officers. You were the only other witness to the crime."

Izuku keeps his face carefully blank as his mind suddenly floods with thoughts. *Eraserhead saw me step in? I didn't sense him there, though. Is he just making that part up to get me to admit it?*

"That's not fair," he objects. "You know my quirk is active most of the time, detective. It's hard to just turn it off."

The detective quirks a brow incredulously. "Eraserhead responded to the victim's screams just after you did. He decided to watch what you would do, and he specifically told me that you spent a moment to power yourself up. I don't consider that being *accidental,* son."

Izuku wants to smash his head against the table. It seems like his idol is a stalker as well as a snitch.

"I've got a question," Izuku starts abruptly, wanting to get the man off track. "Does your quirk work over the phone, too?"

"Wha—?"

The door slides open, and an unfamiliar head pokes its way in. "Sorry for interrupting, sir, but the criminal we just brought in woke up. He's fighting back, and the boss would like your assistance."

Tsukauchi has never looked this tired, Izuku decides.

"I'll be right there." He stands up and gestures for Izuku to do the same. "You can move around, but stay in this building. We'll finish this in a few minutes."

And with that, he's gone, leaving Izuku to his own devices. Which is mistake number one.

They keep the criminals in the eastern part of the station, and I'm in the western part. The offices are past the interrogation rooms, so I have a wide-open shot.

Izuku *did* want to go the library to get some much needed info, but since that's not happening, he'll have to settle for something better.

Tsukauchi's office is the third one down, and it's by the far the biggest. After checking to make sure no one's looking, Izuku darts down the hallway and slips inside, quietly closing the door behind him.

It's fairly clean, if not a little bare. The detective seems to be a simple

man.

Practically skipping over to the rolling chair and plopping down, Izuku shakes the man's mouse. It's already on, so there's no need to scout for the computer's password. It also appears to be on a random file—which makes things easier.

Izuku digs around in his boot and pulls out a flash drive, praying he has enough room on it after his latest library visit. He hasn't cleaned it out in a long time.

He blows off the dirt on it from his recent escapades, plugging it in correctly after only the fourteenth try.

The boy copies as many files as he can get his hands on, dragging the mouse back and forth to cover the hundred folders he can see. Hopefully he'll get something useful.

He doesn't know how long he has until Tsukauchi finishes up with whatever the Chief wanted with him, so he has to be quick.

There's a lot of data on this computer. Just by glancing at the folder names, Izuku can tell some of the files date back to as far as a few centuries ago. There's information on organized crime groups and their hideouts, on their victims and members.

Ah. This is some good shit right here. Much better than what Izuku would've managed to find at the library.

There are voices down the hallway, and Izuku hears the door to one of the interrogation rooms opening, probably to check if he's in there.

Panic slithers up his spine like a snake, and Izuku frantically yanks the flash drive out of the computer and shoves it up his sleeve. The boy has just enough time to click onto the original tab before the office door swings open, revealing an annoyed Detective Tsukauchi.

"What are you doing in here?" The man asks, shooing him to his feet.

Watching porn, is what Izuku wants to say, but then he sees Eraserhead standing against the wall behind the detective, watching the scene with that same unreadable expression. *Okay. I really don't wanna say that in front of one of my heroes.*

"I was looking at your pictures." Izuku grabs for the nearest photo on the desk, and it just so happens to be what looks like Tsukauchi's dog.

“I didn’t take you for a dog person. What breed is it?”

Tsukauchi stares at him in disbelief for all of five seconds, eyes going hazy as he seems to rethink his life choices. “You know what,” he sighs, taking the photo out of the boy’s hand. “Just get out.”

Trying to hide his nerves, Izuku slips past the two men and walks to the main area to wait.

“To wrap this up,” Tsukauchi concludes, emerging from the corner. “I only kept you here to hear your side of the attack. This is a minor issue, and because you’re underage, I can’t really charge you for this, same as your other crimes. But this *will* be going on your record.”

The boy can’t help it; he grins. “Something tells me you really wanted to put me in jail this time.”

Tsukauchi stands and heads for the door. “Don’t get too happy. It’s past curfew for kids your age, so you’ll be going home with an escort.”

“What?”

It’s the detective’s turn to smile at him, looking entirely pleased with himself. “You heard me. Since no one else wants to do it, Eraserhead here will take you home.”

You gotta be shitting me.

“And please try to refrain from putting yourself in danger again. At least for the rest of the week. I already have enough paperwork to do without you adding on to it.”

Izuku gives the man a short nod, even though both of them know that no amount of scolding is going to change anything. He looks at Eraserhead, who’s been standing to the side silently up until this point.

“Come on,” the man grumbles. “My shift's already over.”

I mean, you didn’t have to agree to this. This is your fault for snitching on me.

The walk is awkward, and Izuku comes to find that Eraserhead walks incredibly fast. The hero is walking a few yards ahead of him, despite the fact he doesn’t know where Izuku lives. It’s like he’s waiting for the boy to take the lead, or he’s just waiting to see how long Izuku

will let it happen.

Or maybe Izuku's thinking too much into this and the man has actually forgotten what he's supposed to be doing. But just as Izuku plans to slip into one of the alleyways and out of view, Eraserhead glances back at him, as if reading his mind.

He doesn't say a word, but the boy can feel his impatience hanging heavy in the air, as if silently telling him to hurry the hell up.

Rushing forward to continue walking beside the man, Izuku tries to slow his erratic heart rate. The power the hero's quirk exudes is overwhelming, thrumming underneath Eraserhead's skin even when he's not using it. Izuku has to block out his own senses to focus on trying not to ramble.

He's so cool. There's a high chance his quirk doesn't work on mutant types, so he basically fights quirkless half of the time. He's very skilled; he has a 98% success rate concerning missions, which is one of the highest Izuku's ever seen, rivaling All Might's himself.

I may admire him, but I can't get too close. What if he links me to Rabbit? Does he even know about Rabbit, or is that below his pay grade? Actually, how much does he get paid? Doesn't he have another job on top of this one?

"You're mumbling, kid."

Izuku wishes for a bus to come speeding by at a hundred miles per hour so he could conveniently step out into the middle of the road.

Fuck. Did he hear the Rabbit part? He couldn't have. He wouldn't be acting so nonchalant if he did.

Izuku thought he stopped this little tic of his a long time ago. He hasn't rambled aloud this much in years, not since—

Fabric wraps around his wrist and yanks him out of the way of a pole, stopping Izuku from crashing face-first into it. He stumbles and almost collides with Eraserhead yet again, only just managing to right himself in time.

"Sorry!" He squeaks, covering his face with his hands. "I'm not usually like this."

The hero grunts. He sounds annoyed, though to be fair that seems to

be his default emotion. “Just try to pay attention.”

Izuku nods quickly. “I will, sorry about that!”

Eraserhead gives him a weird look before turning away again, continuing the walk to who-knows-where.

Wait, now that he’s thinking about it, where *is* Izuku going to take him? He can’t just lead him to his actual apartment, which is the entire top floor of an abandoned building in the worst part of the city.

That’s what the police call *illegal.*

He’ll be sent to an orphanage if anyone finds out he’s homeless. He can just take Eraserhead to Kacchan’s house, but then he’d run the risk of the Auntie accidentally exposing him. It's past midnight, after all. He has no reason to be knocking on his best friend’s door when he’s not even expected to be there until tomorrow evening.

The only logical explanation would be to go to a random apartment complex and hope that Eraserhead won’t try to talk with his 'parents.'

There are a few of those buildings a few blocks away from where my place is. I can try there. I know the lady who owns it; she won’t let Eraserhead in if he comes in after me.

That sounds like a solid plan. Now to just put it in action.

Izuku tries to gather up his courage but finds it difficult. God, he’s Rabbit. He shouldn’t be having such an issue talking to a pro hero.

He clears his throat. “I live down by City Hall. It’s like a fifteen-minute walk from here.”

Eraserhead grunts. He fucking grunts. *Again.* Without saying anything.

Izuku isn’t nearly as irritated as he thought he’d be.

The boy nervously shoves his hands into his pockets, fingering the flash drive he drops in one of them. There’s probably so much stuff on it. He already knows he’s not going to get any sleep tonight.

Maybe I can get more leads on that drug ring.

They’re still walking, and Eraserhead stays just a step or two ahead of him the entire time. It’s not exactly a bad quiet, as Izuku is used to

silence. He lives in it, so he's not exactly a stranger to it. He can deal.

But there's something about the way the underground hero holds himself that tells Izuku that he's *waiting* for something. He's thinking.

About what? It's not like the boy can outright ask him.

Izuku takes a chance and speeds up so he's the one slightly in the lead. "So, uh, why are you in this part of town?" He immediately cringes, hearing how aggressive he probably just sounded. "I—I mean, not that you can't be here. It's just that you never usually come this far down on your patrols unless you're going to see the Detective, and even then you don't stay for long. It's usually only when you're already done with your shift and—"

Eraserhead stops in his tracks and stares at him, nose crinkling. "Do you make a habit of yelling out the secrets of all the heroes you first meet, or am I the first case?"

Izuku's mouth snaps shut immediately. *Okay, that was a bit rude, but I deserved that.*

"Sorry," he says sheepishly, looking at the floor.

The hero sighs and glances up at the sky before turning back to him. Izuku suddenly realizes just how tall the man is. "Don't be. Now listen, here's the deal. I can feel your brain working from where I'm standing, kid. You can ask me one question, but then I get to ask you one in return. We can go back and forth."

Izuku blanches. *What does he want to know about me? I'm not important.*

Unless he *has* linked the boy to Rabbit. And then Izuku better be ready to run for his life.

"Like ping-pong?" Izuku asks.

The man pauses as if to gauge if he's joking or not. He must not find anything, as it's only a moment later when he huffs out something like a laugh. "Sure."

"Ooh! Can I go first?" Izuku doesn't wait for a reply. "Can you use Erasure on multiple people at once or just one person? I've never seen you do it to more than one, at least on camera, and I really wanna know if—"

Eraserhead keeps his voice clipped. “Multiple. How do you know so much about me?”

Izuku barely has time to process the first part before the fidgeting starts up again, his previous embarrassment coming back full force. “I just like to study people and their quirks, sir. I think they’re fascinating, and I’ve always liked to analyze things.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I guess it’s just a hobby.”

“Ask your next question.”

“Oh, yeah! About your goggles, I’ve been wondering why you have those slits in them. There has to be a reason you’d go for that look instead of wearing actual protective gear.”

They continue like that for the majority of the walk, and Izuku learns that most of the theories he’s made about Eraserhead are correct. His quirk works through sight, and it wears off when he blinks his eyes, which is why his goggles look the way they are. It prevents villains from knowing where he’s looking.

The man fights essentially quirkless against mutants, and he uses his capture weapon to aid in both long range and close-range combat. *He’s trained his entire life to be able to do the things he can. I wonder if I can reach that point someday.*

Izuku pushes that thought away. Being a hero is just a dream for him. He may have completed all of his education online, making him eligible for a hero school if he wanted to go that route, but he doesn’t really have a choice.

I can’t let myself be known. I get to do the same things a hero can when I’m Rabbit. I just wish I could be more for the people.

“Do your parents let you out this late at night?” Eraserhead asks abruptly, looking straight ahead.

“I live with my Dad,” Izuku lies easily, making sure to mask the discomfort on his face. “He knows I go out here all the time. He just doesn’t care.”

A lie that bad can only be the truth.

“He doesn’t care?” The hero echoes. There’s a slight upturn at the end of his voice, and Izuku freezes.

“Ah, it’s not that he doesn’t care! He just knows I can take care of myself!”

Eraserhead gives him a sidelong glance but leaves the topic alone. Izuku tries to distract him by asking him more questions about his hero life, but the calculating look on the black-haired man’s face never leaves.

Great. Way to keep him off your tail, you piece of shit.

A few minutes later, Izuku spots the building he talked about. The owner works the night shift at the desk area, which Izuku is eternally grateful for at the moment. He spots her face through the lit-up glass doors, and he waves at her from the street.

She doesn’t seem to notice, but Izuku turns around anyway to say goodbye to Eraserhead, hoping he won’t follow him in.

“Thank you for taking me home, sir. I’m sorry for wasting your time.”

Izuku bows low and straightens up just in time to catch the momentary confusion on the man’s face. Eraserhead, unsurprisingly, grunts, and so Izuku starts to head up the steps to his apparent home.

“One more thing, kid.”

Izuku turns to ask him what’s wrong when he suddenly *sees it.* The lights behind the boy allow him to see what Eraserhead holds up between his fingers.

A flash drive. A very *familiar* flash drive.

The hero doesn’t even flinch when Izuku practically leaps down the stairs, eyes wide with panic. “What! How did you—?”

“Nope. It’s my turn to ask a question.” Eraserhead looks almost smug as he continues. “What were you planning on doing with Tsukauchi’s files.”

It’s not a question. More of a demand for an answer. Izuku digs his nails into his palms, panic rising like putty in his throat. “N-Nothing bad, I promise! I just wanted some new people to study, that’s it!”

“So you thought stealing police records was a good way to continue your hobby?”

Fuck. How did he get it out of my pocket without me noticing? No one has

ever been able to do that to me before. Why him? And why now, of all times?

Izuku fumbles with the sleeves of his hoodie. “Um, kinda?”

There’s another beat of silence, spent with Eraserhead looking him up and down, the flash drive still in hand. “You do know,” he starts slowly, “that there are other ways to get information like this? Almost all of the libraries in this area offer free, legal archives of past criminals.”

It sounds like a rhetorical question, but Izuku can’t stop himself from answering. “I mean, I—I *was* heading to one before that mugging happened and, uh, threw off my plans?”

“You didn’t have to intervene.”

And that has Izuku shutting up, because he’s *right.* It’s not Izuku’s job to stop crime, or to put himself in danger to help someone else. He just likes to be a *decent fucking human being sometimes.*

But still. Izuku shouldn’t have stolen those files—not that he regrets it, though. He’d do it again if given the chance.

He hangs his head, hoping for the best. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he doesn’t manage to get Eraserhead off his back. “I’ll use the resources given to me next time,” he promises. “Can I please have the flash drive back now, sir? I—I didn’t copy any of the important files!”

For a moment, Izuku thinks that the man will scoff and tell him he’s crazy, that there’s no way he’ll give it back after what he’s done. The hero can definitely bring him in for this, because isn’t stealing government property a federal crime?

But then, in a move that’s almost anticlimactic, Eraserhead steps forward and places the drive in his hand, already turning to take his leave after fixing Izuku with an intimidating glare. “It’s not like you can use most of that information negatively anyway. Just don’t do it again. You’d only be giving the detective more of a reason to put you in jail, understood?”

In slight shock, Izuku’s head shoots up. “T-Thank you, I didn’t think you’d actually give it back—”

The underground hero jumps away, capture weapon flying out to wrap around a pole and pull him up. It reminds Izuku of that really

old comic book hero from America. Was it Spider-Man or something?

Whatever the name may be, Eraserhead disappears into the night with the same amount of grace that the web-slinger himself had, just like that, leaving Izuku alone in front of an apartment complex he doesn't even live in.

Did that really just happen? Everything kind of feels like a fever dream right now.

The glass doors behind him slide open, and Izuku turns to face the owner's concerned face. "Izuku, is that you? Why are you out at this time of night? It's way too cold out."

After assuring the woman that he's not, in fact, going to freeze to death, Izuku shoves the flash drive back into his pocket—where it will hopefully stay this time—and trudges away with a quick goodbye.

It takes Izuku another five minutes to walk to his actual place, and by the time he's climbed the many flights of stairs to the top floor where he lives, he's shaking with nerves.

I need to pay more attention. He could've arrested me. He should've. And I don't think I could've run from Eraserhead of all people.

He kicks open the mahogany door and slams the flash drive down onto his makeshift desk. "You better be worth it, you sad piece of plastic! Now I've got a pro hero watching me. This is all your fault."

Izuku slumps into his chair and glances at the clock. It's late—or early, depending on what type of person you are. Izuku knows sleep won't come easy to him after the day's events, so he just logs onto his beat-to-hell, generator-run computer, and goes to pick through the files.

He's only got a few hours until daylight. He can pass the time for that long, at least with some instant coffee.

That's about the only food he has in the apartment. Besides some packs of instant ramen noodles. And even then he doesn't even have a way to heat up water for it.

Man, I really do need some help.

Chapter End Notes

calm down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To be honest, no matter how cool it looks in the movies, using a parachute is never fun.

However, when you are over two thousand feet up in the sky in a burning helicopter with an untrained villain-for-a-pilot and a very, very large bomb, you take what you can get.

Has Izuku ever mentioned how much he hates explosives? At least the ones that are about to blow him to little bits and pieces on live television.

Izuku has managed to get in over his head once again by following a group of moron thieves—the very same group his client warned him about a few days prior. They said it would be easy. He'd go in there, set the place on fire because that's the most efficient way to flush a large group out, collect the drugs, and end up saving the day for the third time in as many days.

But the world hates Izuku. He can't ever do things the easy way.

The so-called *moron thieves* ended up being major gang leaders that Izuku put in prison a year or so back, so you can imagine his surprise when he caught sight of their faces inside a base with a lot of weapons, a lot of drugs, and a *fucking helicopter*.

Izuku would've been more excited had one of the henchmen not clocked him in the knees with a crowbar right after his entry. Now he has a limp.

Fucking superb you stupid little goon. I didn't even see you coming.

And truly, Izuku never planned on getting in said helicopter, but when Mr. Tiny got in it with an armful of guns and unmarked medications, what was he supposed to do?

Okay, yeah, he could have called Tsukauchi, saying as he got his phone number from the files he stole a week before now—but it's a Thursday evening, and Izuku knows the detective only works night shifts on certain days of the week! He probably wouldn't be able to do

much of anything since he's off duty right now.

Plus, Izuku couldn't just let them get away! What kind of wanted vigilante would he be if he didn't aggravate the heroes further by doing their jobs better than them?

And so Izuku clung to the landing skids under the helicopter just as it lifted into the sky. In hindsight, Izuku should have considered what he planned to do after dealing with all the bad guys, given the fact that he can't actually fly a helicopter.

But it turns out that luck is actually on his side a little bit today! He doesn't have to worry about that since Mr. Tiny set off the bomb before Izuku actually took him out.

Who puts explosives in a helicopter, anyway? Isn't that, like, illegal?

So here Izuku is, dangling from the bottom of a spiraling aircraft. Izuku curses to himself. He's going to be late for dinner at Kacchan's house. Just like he was last week the day after being captured by Eraserhead.

If he doesn't get killed jumping out of this aircraft, Kacchan will certainly do the job himself.

As the timer ticks to fifteen seconds, Izuku decides he'd much rather die by his friend than face the impending explosion.

Giving a wave to the news helicopter a few hundred yards out, Izuku lets go of the landing skids with a screech. He spreads out his arms and legs to keep himself from tumbling through the air like a rabid banshee—he's done that before and won't do it again; he's learned from his mistakes, thank you very much. The boy would smile if not for the wind whipping at his face and hood.

Izuku has always enjoyed jumping from high places. The feeling is exhilarating. It fills his lungs with fresh air and makes his stomach do backflips. It always leaves him giddy in the end.

This type of jump, however, is a little higher than he usually prefers. But it's fine, he has a parachute, so everything is fine.

He balances himself out well as he plummets, and after deciding that he's a safe distance away from the bomb, he flips onto his back and presses the button under his left armpit.

Nothing happens.

Izuku's heart leaps into his throat, his thoughts coming to a screeching halt.

I didn't reinstall the parachute from last month.

If there's an opening for a modern version of that old movie Dumb and Dumber, Izuku needs to audition.

The helicopter explodes above him in a blinding display of heat and fire, but Izuku can't bring himself to pay attention to it because *fuck, those buildings are getting awfully close.*

He's going to die. But he can't, not before dinner. Kacchan will kill him.

Izuku doesn't realize he's screaming until he feels his voice give out from the strain. He drops like a rock past a skyscraper's roof and sees his reflection in the glass, his Rabbit costume a dark contrast to the blue sky around him.

He watches in horror as he sails closer to the top of another building. *Okay, I can do this.*

There's no telling who's recording. The media is probably capturing these fateful moments right now, so he can't afford to use one of his more flashy quirks. Not that they'd help much in this situation.

He can use *Deflect* to break his fall, but at the rate he's plummeting, the transparent shield would probably shatter upon impact, killing him instantly. It's not strong enough to withstand that much force.

That's what I get for refusing to train with it.

The only other quirk he can use is *Pull,* and even then the only thing he can do is make himself fly into the side of one of the buildings. Concrete is too heavy for him to move, so instead of the building coming towards him, he'll be going towards it.

It's basic physics, and it should work. Izuku just needs to wait a little longer for one of the lower floors. If he does it too early, a hero might come after him and trap him inside one of the higher levels. The closer he is to the ground, to an exit, the better.

Izuku sails past the roof of a smaller hotel and juts out his arm

desperately, letting *Pull* manifest in his palm. The momentum is far too much, the distance far too wide, and Izuku's arm very nearly rips out of its socket as he goes flying towards the side of the building.

This is going to hurt.

In a matter of seconds, he crashes through the window, yelping in pain as his injured leg and arm are jostled again.

He's on a lower level, the polished tile of the hotel room covered in broken glass. The boy goes sprawling against it, barely registering the screaming to his right.

He looks up and is greeted to the sight of a young girl on one of the couches, staring at him and still screeching. She's clutching a small dog, who's currently barking and wriggling to get out of her grasp and probably bite Izuku.

Oops. Time to go.

Izuku struggles to get to his feet, holding his hands up in surrender before stumbling to the door past the girl. He really is trying to think, but his body is still considerably numb.

"Shit, I'm sorry!" He tries, though she most likely doesn't hear him over her own strangled noises. "I'm leaving, it's alright!"

He opens the door with a little too much force, nearly ripping it off its hinges, and proceeds to face plant into the hallway wall. He finds his way to the stairs and runs.

That went better than I thought it would.

Izuku is, regrettably, a little over an hour late. He had to stabilize his knee and make sure to cover up any bruises and cuts on his face and body from the fight. His Rabbit costume is a little torn, but it'll be alright. A little wash is all it needs.

All in all, the mission was a success. The heroes have probably searched through the base and tied up any loose ends, and it seems

the whole of Japan knows what Rabbit did today. Izuku has earned a bit more cash, too, so that's always a plus. He has to buy more fabric for his costume to patch up the tears.

But for now, the boy steps up to the door in front of him before he ends up losing his courage. Kacchan is very serious about schedules.

If Izuku is being honest, though, he doesn't think he deserves the punch to the gut he receives in greeting when Kacchan swings open the door before the boy can even get the chance to knock.

"You nerd!" The blond roars, barreling into him before Izuku can defend himself. "You're fucking late again!"

Izuku yelps, falling to the ground with Kacchan standing over him. "That's not my fault! I told you I might be a little late—"

Kacchan yanks him up by the front of his shirt, dragging him inside and slamming the door shut. "That was for last week, you dick!"

"You know that goes for every time, Kacchan! I've told you this."

The explosive teen chuffs in irritation. "Whatever, you shithead. You're not the one who had to listen to the old hag bitch about you being in trouble again. You're lucky she didn't call the police to report your fucking ass *missing."*

Izuku frowns to himself as his friend shoves him onto the couch. "I thought you can't report someone missing unless it's been twenty-four hours."

"That's a myth, dumbass!" The blond plops down next to him, flicking through channels on the TV faster than Izuku can keep up. "Now shut the hell up, dinner's almost ready."

Izuku just rolls his eyes, biting back his own retort. He won't admit it to anyone, but the fight—as quick as it was—wore him out. His knee is getting on his nerves. He now has a newfound reason to hate crowbars.

Another voice cuts in then, sounding from the top of the stairs behind them. "Hey, what's with all the yelling, brat? I thought I told you to shut up!" Bakugou Mitsuki pokes her head around the corner, and her face immediately lights up upon seeing Izuku on the couch. She starts down the stairs with a smile. "Oh, hon, you're finally here! I was starting to get worried about you. Where've you been?"

Izuku jumps to his feet and bows quickly, ignoring the complaints he gets from his friend about standing in front of the TV. “Sorry, Auntie. I didn’t mean to worry you. I got a little distracted by a villain fight, that’s all! But I promise I’m fine.”

Izuku chooses to ignore Kacchan’s quiet *that’s a shitty lie,* because he’s technically not lying. It *was* a villain fight, and he *did* get distracted.

The woman, thankfully, doesn’t hear her son, and she wraps Izuku up in a tight hug, picking him up and swinging him from side to side in typical Bakugou fashion. “Oh, that’s alright, kiddo. You came just in time. The food’ll be ready in a few.” She drops him and turns to her son with a glare. “Your father has a migraine, Katsuki, so be quiet!”

“How is that my problem?” Kacchan snaps, palms cackling. “He’s always feeling shitty!”

Izuku just sighs as the mother and son duo go at it again, loud enough to wake up the entire neighborhood. He’s used to this, in a sense. That’s just how the dynamic is in this house.

He’d be lying if he says he doesn’t like it.

Izuku instead goes into the kitchen to try and help with dinner. He may not cook a lot nowadays, partially because he doesn’t have a lot of money for food and partially because he’s too lazy, but he does know his way around the kitchen.

He loves to cook. Being alone for the better part of his life, Izuku had to find some way to pass the time without school or family. And cooking, he found quickly, is a sure way to keep himself occupied. Living on your own for years kind of forces you to learn how to take care of yourself.

And besides, he likes to cook because it allows him to feel the warmth of something other than fire.

It looks like Mitsuki is making katsudon tonight, if the pork and eggs on the counter are anything to go by. Izuku feels his stomach rumble. That’s his favorite meal, and the entire Bakugou family knows it.

I don’t deserve you, Auntie.

It looks like the only thing that needs to be done is to finish the rice. That’s easy.

Izuku hums a tune to himself as he takes out plates and sets the table. He's done this often enough for it to feel like second nature. The Bakugous invite him over once a week, usually every Thursday night, for dinner or breakfast. They are the only people he'd ever consider to be his family.

Though that's yet another thing he won't admit to anyone else. If somebody finds out about his relationship with them, if they see how he looks at them whenever they let him come over, everything will be screwed.

If Father finds out I'm still visiting this often, they'll all end up dead.

Izuku spreads the rice over the plates and prepares to divvy up the food. The smell makes his mouth water, and the boy forces himself not to scarf everything down.

All that ass-kicking has left him starved, so sue him for literally salivating.

A heavy hand lands on his shoulder, and Izuku nearly jumps out of his skin when Kacchan teases right beside his ear.

"You hungry?"

Izuku flushes, not realizing he was staring so intently at the food on the table. "Shut up, it's been a long day!"

The smirk drops off his friend's face, being replaced with something more suspicious. Izuku tries to push down his sudden nervousness.

Kacchan crosses his arms. "So where were you, really? And don't fucking lie to me. You've gotten caught up in fights loads of times, but you've never been this late before."

"I told you, Kacchan, I—"

"Then tell me again!" His palms cackle dangerously, but Izuku doesn't flinch. He knows the other boy would never hurt him like that. "I don't have time for your shitty excuses! And don't be stupid enough to think I didn't notice how fucked up your leg is."

Izuku bites his lip, eyes flicking toward the doorway. "I'll tell you later. Auntie might come down any second."

"She's trying to get Dad out of bed, so she won't be back for a while.

Now spill it before I blow your ass up!”

Too late, Izuku thinks to himself. *Already had my ass almost blown up today. It must be quite famous for everyone to want a piece of it.*

“You know,” Izuku says instead. “It almost sounds like you care, Kacchan.”

“I swear I'm going to—” Explosions pop from the boy’s palms, so Izuku backtracks quickly.

“Okay, okay! I’ll tell you, just give me a second.”

Kacchan leans back with a scowl. “Better be a good reason for worrying me.”

Finishing up with setting the table, Izuku leads him back to the living room so he can see when Mistuki comes down the stairs. He doesn’t sit down, too full of nerves to be in one place. “You know that client I told you about? The one who told me about this new drug ring in the city over?”

Kacchan huffs. “Get to the point.”

“Well, I couldn’t find any information on the names I came up with, though they did sound familiar to me. I went into their base a few hours ago and tried to flush them out, but it was harder than I thought.”

Izuku trails off near the end, causing Kacchan to gesture for him to spit it out. “And?”

“Well, I set the place on fire, like usual, but then I had to—” Izuku has a reason for cutting off this time, his mouth going slack as his eyes catch the picture on the television. *Oh, wow.*

Kacchan follows his gaze, blinking at the video footage conveniently being shown on the news channel. It’s a rerun from the fight, and it's currently showing the spiraling helicopter as it heads toward the ground at a rapid pace.

Rabbit is seen clutching the rails of it, only to let go a few moments later, a huge explosion following not long after.

Of fucking course they’d choose to replay the footage right now.

There’s silence. Izuku risks a glance at his friend, only to see a vein

popping out of his skull. “Uh, Kacchan?”

The teen turns to him, and Izuku is pretty sure he would have become a victim of homicide had Mitsuki’s voice not rung out from the top of the stairs. “Boys, it’s dinner time! Get to the table!”

Izuku meets Kacchan’s eyes with a deadpan look. “It’s not what it looks like, I swear.”

Kacchan just grins, but it’s all teeth.

Maybe I am going to die.

It turns out that the food is, in fact, as good as it looks. Izuku takes one bite and nearly moans at just how delicious it is. The pork practically melts in his mouth, and the eggs and rice balance out the salty taste of the tonkatsu sauce perfectly.

“This is delicious as always!” He groans. “Thank you for the food.”

Mitsuki looks up at him and smiles, eyes crinkling. “You’re welcome, kiddo! I was rushin' a bit, but I think it turned out alright.”

“It turned out great!” Izuku confirms, and Masaru agrees with him around his own mouthful of pork.

The blonde woman waves away the praise, turning to talk to her husband some more about something from work.

Izuku glances at Kacchan just as the boy starts to speak, his voice low: “Everything tastes good when you haven’t eaten in days, huh, Deku?”

He flashes Izuku a fiery look, telling the boy all he needs to know about what he’s referring to.

“What was that?” Masaru asks, frowning, but Izuku kicks Kacchan from under the table before he can reply.

“He said it’s good, too,” he lies quickly, giving a nervous smile at the two adults across from him.

For a few, tense moments, everything is silent, but then Mitsuki shrugs and turns back to the conversation with her husband—not before narrowing her eyes suspiciously at them, though.

Izuku breathes out a sigh in relief. *Fuck, that was close.*

Kacchan is still glaring at him, and Izuku kicks him again under the table. His friend hisses but otherwise says nothing.

Jesus. Does he want to expose me? We've already talked about this. He knows I try to eat when I can.

Izuku tries to focus back on his food, continuing to eat as if his life depends on it. Katsudon tastes best hot, so he doesn't want it to get cold.

He cleans off the plate in record time and leans back slightly in his chair. He's still hungry. He could go for another portion, but he also doesn't want to eat more than he should.

Mitsuki and Masaru are still eating, albeit slowly. They don't look like they're going for seconds anytime soon. And Kacchan—

The teen takes a large spoonful from the pan in the middle of the table and drops the food onto Izuku's plate, not saying a word.

Huh. I swear he can read my mind.

He throws him a quick, grateful look, having not completely forgiven him for the comment a few minutes earlier, and digs in again.

"So," Mitsuki says suddenly, once everyone is almost finished. "It's getting late, Izuku, so why don't you stay the night here?"

Izuku pauses as three pairs of eyes land on him. He gulps down a piece of egg and takes a nervous sip of his soda. "Uh, I'm not sure Father would like it if I—"

"Nonsense," Mitsuki interrupts, voice bright. "It's dark out, and the crime rate around here has been high nowadays. I'd feel better if you stayed with us tonight."

Masaru clears his throat then. "You don't have to, of course. It's just a thought." He gives his wife a pointed look. "Don't pressure him, Mitsuki; it's his choice."

"It's fine," Izuku cuts in, not wanting the couple to argue. "If it's

alright with you guys, I guess I can stay the night."

Kacchan grunts from his place at the table while Masaru nods his reassurance.

Mitsuki clasps her hands together. "Great! I'm sure Hisashi won't mind since he's never there at the house anyways."

The entire room seems to drop a few thousand degrees, and Izuku winces. Kacchan's head snaps up to face him, as if to gauge his reaction, and Izuku hears Masaru choke on his food. "Mitsuki, that's not—"

She cuts him off before he can finish telling her off. "Oh come on, you know I'm right! That bastard doesn't give a shit about him or any of us for that matter! He won't care if Izuku stays the night here."

"You can't just say that," Masaru says, trying and failing to come up with a good defense.

Mitsuki fires back, and Izuku half expects Kacchan to join the fight, too, but he just watches his friend with narrowed eyes.

The green-haired boy winces. He doesn't like being the cause of one of Mitsuki and Masaru's arguments, even though it happens often enough. He knows it's not really his fault, but still.

Izuku waves his hands in front of him as if to fan away the metaphorical flames, garnering both of the adults' attention. "It's okay," he amends. "Er, Father *is* kind of a jerk sometimes, but I don't think he'll mind this time."

Mitsuki brightens up instantly. "Oh, that's good." She stands up and starts to collect the plates. "Well, dessert is in the oven, so stay here while I get it."

She leaves the dining room quickly, and Masaru doesn't waste any time before leaning over the table. "Sorry about that," he mutters. "You know how she gets."

"I can still hear you!"

Masaru sighs at his wife's yell, and Izuku hides his grin behind a hand. "It's alright," the boy repeats. "Auntie's right, after all."

The dessert, it turns out, is a weird sort of pie filled with chocolate

and cream. It doesn't taste bad at all, and so Izuku has to stop himself after his second slice.

He helps Masaru with washing the dishes and putting away the leftovers, making small talk along the way. Speaking with the older Bakugou is always calming for him.

He's the polar opposite of Mitsuki and Kacchan, so it was quite a shock to Izuku when he was first introduced to him all those years ago. He still finds it hard to believe that such a quiet man married such a headstrong woman. Masaru is like a river, steady and unbreakable, whilst Mitsuki is like a raging inferno, scalding and disastrous.

But after spending so much time with the man, Izuku has come to realize that they both complement each other in their own way.

Izuku doesn't mind talking with him. Masaru is nice to be around. The power his gentle quirk exudes is comforting, almost, so the boy tries to soak it up all he can.

Once everything's cleaned up, Masaru ruffles Izuku's hair softly before joining Mitsuki in the living room.

Oh. That was nice.

Izuku climbs the stairs to Kacchan's bedroom after wishing the couple a good night, a skip in his step now.

His happiness, however, depletes as soon as he opens the door.

Kacchan tackles him, and Izuku instinctively spins around to throw the boy over his hip. Kacchan grabs his arm and brings him down with him, shoving his face into the carpeted ground. "I'm gonna kill you, nerd."

"Fuck!" Izuku gasps, a little bit of pain running through him from the movements. "Get off me, Kacchan! I'm injured!"

"Not a chance. You deserve to get your ass beat for the shit you pulled."

Izuku whines. "That's not my fault! Why can't you—" A harder press to the ground has him shutting up, and he huffs in frustration.

He can hear Kacchan's grin as he speaks. "Just admit it, Deku. I win! I

always win! Now say it!”

Any other time and Izuku probably would have pushed his friend some more. He’d make him angry enough to start another fight out of pure pettiness. But right now, all Izuku wants to do is sleep. “Fine. You win.”

Kacchan shakes his head. “I don’t think I heard you.”

“You always win!” Izuku throws the other teen off of him and sits up against the bed. “Happy now?”

“Always.”

Izuku starts to fix the wrappings on his knee, and the boy can feel his friend’s piercing gaze on him. He tries to ignore it, putting his hair up into a small bun to try and distract himself, but it doesn’t work.

When his skin starts to itch in discomfort, he looks up to meets Kacchan’s sour expression. “What?”

Kacchan, surprisingly, answers him. “Are you alright?”

It’s clear that he’s not talking about his injuries.

Izuku feels himself relax. “Yeah. I don’t mind it when she talks about him. I’m not going to piss and shit and *cry* at the mention of his name or something, Kacchan.”

“I don’t know why you won’t just tell them.”

He frowns. “About what? My father being the most feared villain alive? Yeah, that’d go over real well.”

Kacchan rolls his eyes. “I meant about your homelessness, shithead. It would be easier for you if you just told everyone.”

“And then I’d be sent to an orphanage, or worse.” Izuku stands up and goes to get the emergency nightclothes Kacchan keeps under the bed in case he stays over. “Is that what you want to happen?”

“They’d take you in! The hag already said she’d adopt you in a heartbeat if given the chance! Why won’t you—”

“You know why.” Izuku’s voice is tight, cutting right over his friend. “I’m already too close to you guys. I can’t risk putting you all in danger like that. I’m sorry.”

Kacchan snorts. “That’s hypocritical, Deku. You could just—”

“Please just drop it.”

Maybe it’s the look on Izuku’s face that does it, or maybe the tone of his voice, but either way Kacchan does drop it after only a few moments of hesitance. He always does. He cares about Izuku too much to make him upset. Especially when it comes to the topic of his father. The last time he’d argued with him over this, Izuku nearly had a breakdown.

That's probably what would've happened now if he kept pushing.

“Fine,” Kacchan says begrudgingly. “But you’re telling me about what happened today. In detail, shitface.”

So Izuku does. He talks to him about the information his client gave him, telling him how the targets were supposed to be just petty thugs. He tells him how that was a *fucking lie* and how he nearly had his kneecaps taken out by a gremlin. He explains how he executed the flawless takedown of the entire base and burnt everything to ash, and how he hitched a ride with the helicopter seen on the news.

Kacchan cackles and sneers at the right moments, slowly putting Izuku at ease again.

Izuku frowns when he gets to one part, though. “The helicopter exploded with the bad guy still inside. He was unconscious, and I think I saw him get caught by one of the flying heroes, but still.”

“That sucks ass,” Kacchan says, not a hint of remorse in his voice.

“Kacchan,” Izuku chides.

The teen scoffs again. “What? He was a villain. I say good riddance to all those fuckers.”

“But he was still a person, Kacchan!” Izuku shakes his head. “I wouldn’t care if I didn’t already know he had a family waiting for him. He was one of the original group I put away the first time. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, so I guess I just feel bad.”

His friend doesn’t back down. “You did his family a favor. I’m not going to feel bad for a lowlife. He deserved what they got. ‘Sides, you even said he got caught. It’s not like he’s dead.”

Izuku watches Kacchan's face for a moment, trying to decide whether or not he's joking. Finally, the boy sighs. "You're insufferable."

"Shut your face, nerd. It's already after nine, so go to sleep."

Kacchan flops onto the bed and flicks on his fan, kicking off his slippers in the process.

Izuku smirks to himself, settling on his side of the mattress. "You act like you're so tough, and yet you still go to bed at nine every night like a little kid."

A foot lands in his stomach, kicking him off the bed entirely. He just giggles as he lands, facedown, on the carpeted flooring.

I deserved that.

He doesn't bother getting back up. He doesn't like to sleep on beds anyway. They're too soft for him.

Izuku rolls onto his back and looks up at the ceiling, Kacchan's light breathing a white noise beside him. A blanket and pillow are tossed his way, and he mumbles his thanks.

As expected, he gets no reply.

Today is, overall, a good day. A nice, hot dinner was just the icing on the cake—it always is, in all fairness. Cooking is fascinating to him, and today made him appreciate it even more. He may have to start it up again.

He used to cook a lot, but now he prioritizes certain things over food. He makes his own weapons. He saves up the money he earns for necessities like his phone bill. He needs tech to make his support items.

Speaking of which, he has to make more of his pink sludge bombs.

He also never really feels hungry a lot. So why waste food if he doesn't need it, right? It's best to save his belongings for better things. But that's not the point.

He's full, he's content, and he's just completed another one of his missions. It may have been harder than he thought, but it was a success. He pocketed a lot of the money the gang had stashed in their boxes.

So, today has been eventful, and all Izuku wants to do is rest.

His mind, however, has other ideas. He doesn’t actually fall asleep until the moon starts to dip low into the sky and the early lights of the morning start to filter in through the window.

Izuku pretends he wasn’t awake for the whole night when Kacchan gets up to go to school.

He didn't mean to stay up. Insomnia just has a way of creeping up on you like that.

Chapter End Notes

e

rivals

Chapter Notes

(cw: bullying, suicide baiting)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouta is done with life right about now.

His day started out pretty well. He woke up at a fairly good time, had his favorite coffee, ate breakfast with his obnoxiously loud husband, and then proceeded off to work.

He may have expelled his entire homeroom class a few months earlier, but he still has other lessons to teach the rest of the students at UA. Besides, Nezu doesn't allow his teachers to just slack off, even when they technically don't have a class to teach.

But back to the point—everything started out okay. He felt relaxed. Content. So content that it made him suspicious, because something *has* to go wrong.

Good days like this one don't come by very often, especially on a weekday when he has to work. It just doesn't happen.

It's around lunchtime when he gets the call, and Shouta can tell just by looking at the caller ID that his instincts were correct, as always.

The underground hero sighs and puts down his chopsticks, wondering balefully if he'll ever get the chance to finish his teriyaki. "What is it, Tsukauchi?"

The detective laughs a little over the line. *"Don't sound too upset, I think you'll enjoy your visit this time."*

Here we go.

Shouta picks at his food, aware of Hizashi and Nemuri staring at him as he speaks. "You want me to come to the station again?"

"If you can. I only need a few minutes, at the very least."

"I'll see if Nezu will let me leave early after my last lesson. What do you need?"

“I’m sure you saw the news last night.”

The hero snorts. “Of course I did. It’s all everyone’s talking about right now.”

Shutting up about Rabbit is something the media doesn’t know how to do. The vigilante has done it yet again, embarrassing all of the pro heroes in the city yesterday by taking down a drug ring that local authorities hadn’t even been able to locate, much less initiate a full takedown on. Shouta didn't actually watch the coverage of it live, as he was getting ready for his patrol, but Hizashi recorded it for him.

Not that he needed to, though. Every news station within a fifty-mile radius of the attack has been replaying the scene of Rabbit jumping out of the helicopter like some sort of maniac every five minutes. It’s like they truly have nothing else to report on.

It’s getting to be kind of annoying.

“Well, I feel like it’s time to start the process, Aizawa.”

Shouta doesn’t have to ask what that means. They’ve been planning it for a while. Shouta has been keeping an eye on Rabbit for a few weeks now—nothing too special. Just some tracking to figure out where the vigilante tends to patrol, and also of the area and perimeter he covers.

So far, he hasn’t been able to gather much. The kid is slippery. He seems to know that he’s being followed, and after only a few minutes of Shouta trailing him, Rabbit just disappears into thin air. As if he’d never been there in the first place.

Shouta hates to admit that he’s a little impressed. Now, that’s not to say the kid has completely bested him—of course not. He’s fast, irritatingly so, but he’s still young and jumpy. Twice, Shouta has been presented with the chance to jump him, but both times he refrained. Not only because he’s not a fan of attacking a person who just got done saving a victim of assault or robbery but also because he knew, deep down, that it wouldn’t have solved the core of the issue.

“Aizawa?” The detective’s inquiring voice brings him out of his thoughts. *“Can you be at the station in, say, a few hours?”*

Right. This is his case after all.

Shouta makes an affirmative noise. “I’ll see to it. Give me a little bit.”

He hangs up, and with a long-suffering sigh, Shouta gets up to talk with the principal. He already knows he's going to regret this.

"Going to the station?" Hizashi asks, peering up at him from his place at the table.

Shouta nods, grabbing his scarf off the hook and wrapping it around his neck. "Is it alright if I take the car? You might have to walk home."

"Sure! Hey, I'm going to get some more ground sausage before lunch is over. We ran out this morning, so I'll be leaving in a few."

Yawning, Shouta nods in confirmation and picks up his sleeping bag from the corner by the door, feeling the beginnings of another headache coming on. He starts for his office to gather the work for his next class. Nezu will no doubt say yes when he asks. The mammal has never had an issue with him leaving early before if it's for police business.

He passes back by the teacher's lounge and chooses to ignore Hizashi's amplified laughter as the voice hero berates Nemuri for taking the rest of his teriyaki.

I'll get her back tomorrow.

Izuku hates bullies.

To be fair, most everyone does. You'd have to be a special kind of asshole to actively support bullying, especially when it's against people who don't deserve it.

Which is why it's easy for Izuku to stand up to jerks. It's the right thing to do. He knows what it's like to be put down, to be hated by everyone around you and be spit on and treated like nothing more than an animal.

He knows what it feels like, so Izuku will be damned if he lets someone else go through that.

He tries to help as best he can. Most times, he does it well. He'll see a group of kids picking on someone that they deem weaker, and he'll step in. Most of the time, the bullies back down.

That's the thing. Most bullies aren't used to their victims fighting back. They'll get surprised. They'll insult you a bit, and then make their exit after deciding it's not worth it.

But it's not really an exit, it's not really a show of kindness. It's a show of *cowardice.* It's more of an escape.

Some bullies, however, don't back down. These are the ones you really have to watch out for. These ones will break you down. They'll pick out the things you hate most about yourself and bring it out into the light for everyone and their grandma to see.

It's harsh, and it's wrong. But it happens. And Izuku had thought that after everything he's gone through, after all the shit he's overcome, he'd become immune to it. And in many ways, he has.

But the insults hurt worse coming from certain people; people who you used to trust.

After Kacchan leaves for school, Izuku takes a quick shower and borrows some of his clothes, thinking that his friend probably won't mind.

Probably.

When he comes downstairs, Mitsuki is sitting at the counter with a cup of coffee in hand, getting ready for work. Masaru must have already left. It's a Friday, after all. Those are the busiest days of the month.

Izuku makes sure to thank her again for letting him stay, and after promising to be safe and not be late next time he comes over, the boy skips out of the house with his notebook in his hoodie pocket.

He has a few things to do today, seeing as his Rabbit costume has a few holes in it now, plus the fact that some of his weapons got destroyed when he set the hideout on fire. *The prices you pay for salvation.*

So today he has to buy some fabric to patch up his costume, look through some dumpsters for abandoned technology and metal parts, and then wash his clothes at the laundromat. Which makes it a full

day for him.

He's on the way to the embroidery story down the street from his apartment when his plans first seem to go down the drain. Because as he continues to slip through the crowds of people, he accidentally bumps into someone.

Except it's not an accident. Not on their part, at least.

The next thing he knows, Izuku is being grabbed by meaty hands and slammed into the concrete wall just inside the entrance of an alley.

His wide eyes trail up to meet the scornful expression of a boy around his height, and Izuku can already tell that things aren't about to go his way.

He knows this kid. No, he knows these *kids,* because there's more than one. Three, to be exact. All encasing him in, arms coming out to trap him against the dirty wall.

And honestly, Izuku could have avoided this. He felt the movement in the air a split second before the hand even came into contact with his shoulder, just before he was pushed by two other pairs of hands into the alleyway. He could've avoided it because he'd *felt* the attack coming.

In four seconds flat, Izuku could have had all three of these kids on the ground crying. Probably sporting a broken bone or split lip, or something even worse.

But he's not Rabbit, here. He can't fight them. And besides, if he dodged the hand, the idiot would've hit the guy behind Izuku.

You see, it's different when you're defending someone else from a bully or criminal. At that point, it becomes self-defense. The laws become more lenient at that point, especially when you have an alibi or witness to back you up.

But here, right now, the only witness is Izuku himself. And to make matters worse, he's the one getting bullied.

Which means he can't fight back. Not unless he wants to find himself in jail. For real this time. He can get arrested if he harms them because no one ever believes the victim. Not when they're someone like Midoriya Izuku.

Someone who already has a history of violence and volatility from the age of six and beyond.

His eyes glance between the trio, and Izuku's throat suddenly tightens.

It hurts worse coming from certain people. People who you used to trust.

These are Kacchan's friends. Or, should he say, were. He recognizes them all. The one with spindly fingers and an angular face—he's the one Kacchan hates the most. He's in the middle of the group now, still holding Izuku against the wall. He must be the acting leader since Kacchan is gone.

The next one is a boy Izuku can only faintly remember. He has a square chin with hair that stops right above his eyes, and Izuku can't quite recall what his quirk is, but he can feel its faint power humming beneath the other boy's skin.

But Izuku remembers Bully Number Three clearly. He's round, just a little bit chubby. The most defining features, however, are the crimson wings he sports on his back, folded neatly in on themselves. They look almost leathery in texture, set with talons at the end of each joint. They've definitely gotten bigger since the last time Izuku's seen them.

"Tsubasa?" Izuku breathes out, staring at his old friend.

The boy doesn't answer, only letting out a sneer as he looks back at the ringleader—waiting for an order, Izuku faintly realizes. The power dynamic here is obvious.

Kacchan's replacement presses him harder against the wall, his breath hot against Izuku's cheek.

"Midoriya," he scoffs, and his voice is almost laughable. It's almost as if the boy is forcing himself to sound like an edgy teenager who's just finished his second bowl of weed. "Didn't think we'd find you here of all places."

It sounds like a normal conversation to anyone else, when in reality it's anything but. It's more of the calm before a storm. That's how they get you, Izuku thinks. They build you up and make you think you're their friend, and then they hit you where it's hardest.

They're nothing but a bunch of slimy assholes, thinking they're tough shit.

Izuku can identify this. He can identify the problem and even come up with the solution for it, but the problem is just that he can't seem to execute it.

A slap to the face jolts him right out of his thoughts. He stumbles slightly, realizing all of a sudden that his knee still hurts like a bitch. Escaping won't be an easy feat.

"I asked you a question, Deku," the leader starts up again, getting right in his face. "You don't wanna be rude, do ya? Answer me."

Deku. He called him Deku. As in, useless. As in, the nickname Kacchan gave to him a long time ago. The nickname that started out as an insult and is now nothing more than a term of aggressive endearment —but only when it comes from Kacchan.

And now this idiot is bringing back the old meaning behind his name? Anger rises up within him, setting his insides on fire. He shouldn't stand for it. He *really* shouldn't. He can almost hear his father's soft words in his mind, egging him on, promising him he won't get in trouble if drags these boys through the mud until they beg for him to stop.

"Shouldn't you guys be at school?" Izuku asks instead, clearing his throat and praying he doesn't sound as snappy as he thinks. "It's not time for it to be out yet—"

He sees the next smack coming and braces for it, relaxing his face like he's been taught multiple times. His head snaps sideways with the force of the blow, and Izuku is now facing the street, only just able to see what's going on through the gaps left between the two boys closest to him.

He takes a few deep breaths in through his nose, ignoring their barked laughter all around him. It sounds like nails on a chalkboard.

"Now, I don't think that's any of your business, is it?" That's the forgotten boy, the one Izuku can only faintly remember. His voice is squeaky, almost artificially so.

Izuku wishes he'd been patrolling as Rabbit at this moment. He would've roasted the hell out of them all.

So they got kicked out, or are they skipping? Probably the first.

He receives a kick to the shin, and he nearly buckles as his bad knee is

jostled even more. He has to stay up. He's taken a whole lot worse before. He just has to keep up the facade for enough time for them to get bored with him. Or maybe for someone to step in.

They tease him, but he's used to these words. They're more of a backdrop to his thoughts than real insults.

"Worthless."

"Creep."

"Bakugou's little witch bitch."

"Finally decided to drop out of school, huh, Deku?"

"Guess he figured out he wouldn't make it after all."

Izuku sees a few people glance inside the alleyway when they walk past. But instead of lending a hand, they just turn away. They keep walking.

In a way, Izuku isn't surprised, but it doesn't stop the new spark of rage from igniting inside of him. He forces it down with a swallow. This is not the best area to lose his cool in.

They're just kids. That's probably what everyone's thinking. The onlookers. *Just boys being boys, roughhousing and all that. Must be good friends.*

But there's no way. No way those people can't see what's going on. And what's even worse, Izuku spots a cop on the other side of the street, watching the crowds for any suspicious movements or interesting events.

He catches his eye, and for a few long moments, Izuku waits. He waits for the cop to come over and stop them. To break up the literal assault going on. But he doesn't. He gives Izuku one last look before glancing away as if he never noticed him there in the first place.

Somewhere in the midst of the spite-fueled rants being thrown his way, Izuku ends up falling to the asphalt. That's when Tsubasa lands his first hit on him—a weak kick to his stomach.

They keep going, but it doesn't hurt much. Having a high pain tolerance really helps in these circumstances. Besides, they're not hurting him too badly. And if they're doing it to him, chances are

they'd do it to someone else if given the moment. Better Izuku than someone else.

He wants to fight back, but another part of himself knows he can't. Because for one, they don't know any better. They've never been taught how to deal with their emotions correctly, which is still not an excuse, but it is a reason.

Kacchan would've ended up like them. He probably would've ended up worse had Auntie not forced him into therapy.

Secondly, Izuku can't bring any attention to himself in this alleyway. If he becomes the punching bag for once, or maybe even a few times, they might decide not to hurt anyone else. He can be that sacrifice.

Izuku would love to beat their asses and hand them over to the police —*oh, to Tsukauchi! The detective loves straightening out bullies!*—but chances are he'd be put in jail even with the detective's quirk to help him out. There's no proof that any of this happened, and lie detectors (even human ones) are still subjective in most courts. Even if they do believe him, his past record is enough to lock him up anyway.

If he attempts to beat them badly and run, they might snitch, and then he'll be hunted by Tsukauchi and the others.

The only thing Izuku can do is fight back just a little bit. Just enough to keep them interested and off of someone else's case. He can humor them a little. Besides, this is good practice for him.

He sees a steel-toed boot heading for his nose and instinctively grabs it, twisting the leg and ankle simultaneously so the person trips over their own body.

The ringleader lands next to him and starts yelling more obscenities at him, becoming progressively louder—which is what Izuku wants.

Even after these years, the trio is still utterly predictable. They'll no doubt take any bait he lays out for them.

It's not until elongated fingers reach into his hoodie pocket does he actually startle. His notebook—his analysis notebook, filled with all of his notes and theories on all the recent villains and heroes—is snatched out of his grasp and thrown. Right into a large puddle next to a dumpster.

Are you fucking serious?

“Hey, what are you—!” Izuku is cut off by Tsubasa’s meaty fist flying towards him, and quicker than lightning, Izuku grabs his wrist between his fingers and yanks him forward. Tsubasa smashes face-first into the wall with a loud crack and cries out in pain, slumping to the side.

Well. So much for not doing too much damage.

The boy Izuku had forgotten about gasps, taking a few steps back from his previous place beside Tsubasa. He’s obviously the weakest link. Izuku had a feeling he would crumble as soon as one of his friends went down.

Izuku jumps to his feet and heads for his notebook, only for Ringleader to grab the back of his hoodie and swing him around.

Don’t hit him. You might hurt him.

He merely ducks under Ringleader’s fist, kneeing the other boy in the stomach so he stumbles away. Tsubasa must’ve recovered already, as when Izuku turns back, the mutant is now holding the notebook in his hand with a furious look on his face.

“Tsubasa,” Izuku tries, holding his hands out placatingly. “Please. Give me my—”

There’s a rush of wind to his side, and Izuku forces himself not to move as the third boy fucking slaps him with the back of his palm.

And *what?* What kind of hit is that? What a bitch move!

Izuku tastes iron in his mouth and grits his teeth, dazed for only a moment. Ringleader is on his other side now, blocking him in. Tsubasa stands triumphantly in front of him with his wings outstretched.

I need my notebook, and they’re going to make me fight to get it.

They *want* him to fight. They want him to get arrested, most likely.

At this point, fuck it. Whatever. He needs his notebook back, no matter the cost. He’s spent a lot of time on it, and his own analysis of his quirks are in there. Izuku crouches down a little lower, fists clenching.

Memories of his *father* are in it. He can’t afford to lose it.

He prepares for a fight, and he sees the trio tense in anticipation. They'll go for the first hit, at least Ringleader will. Tsubasa will likely follow, and the third one will have no choice but to—

Ringleader is rushing forward, fingers outstretched to do who knows what, when a loud voice comes from the entrance to the alleyway and freezes them in their tracks.

"What's going on here, boys?"

Izuku stares at the intruder—because that's what he is at the moment. He could be a cop looking to arrest him, or maybe even a random civilian looking to get in on the action.

It sounds sick, but Izuku has seen it happen before.

The man is tall and lanky, and his hair (a nice, light shade of yellow that almost looks white) is pulled back to presumably keep it from getting in his eyes. It looks like he has it in a half-bun.

But that's not the most interesting thing about the mystery man. He has red, rectangular glasses sitting on the bridge of his nose, framing a set of piercing green eyes.

Eyes that Izuku swears he knows, but just can't put his finger on. The voice, too, he realizes. It has a certain ring to it.

And also—is he carrying a bag of cat food and ground sausage?

Izuku opens his mouth to speak, but Ringleader beats him to it. "Oh, uh, were just having some fun, sir!"

His voice is high-pitched, and it's such an obvious lie that Izuku wants to laughs. *He should've let me talk, I would've been a hell of a lot more convincing.*

And from the looks of it, Mystery Man doesn't believe the act either. "Oh, yeah?" He frowns a little, walking casually towards them while still carrying his bag. "What'cha doing with that notebook there, kiddo?"

He's looking at Tsubasa, and the boy in question folds under the adult's knowing glare. He sheepishly shoves the journal back into Izuku's chest, wings flapping slightly out of nerves. "We're all just, er, playing a game of catch, ya know?"

Real convincing. Maybe phrase it like a statement next time, dragon boy, and it might be a little more believable.

Izuku holds his notebook tightly, not wanting to risk it getting tossed into another puddle.

Mystery Man stops a few feet away from him, frown deepening. “Is that right? Well, I think maybe you three should pick another game. This one doesn’t look like too much fun, yeah?”

It sounds more like an order, and Izuku is hit again with the same feeling that he knows this man.

The intruder—savior, more like—points back to the mouth of the alley with a thumb, giving the boys all the incentive they need to start scrambling.

They keep a safe distance away from Mystery Man as they flee towards the exit, and the one closest to Izuku, the Forgotten Boy, shoots him a scathing look and says, voice low, “You should’ve done everyone a favor and jumped off a building once you quit school, Deku.”

Izuku had been waiting for a comment like that, had been waiting for a taunt, a finishing blow, but now that he’s actually hearing those familiar words, he feels himself get sick.

"Do ya like making a fool out of me? You think I’ll believe you weren’t just lying to me all that time? Go take a fucking dive off a roof if you think for one damn second I’ll forgive you!”

The memory tastes foul on his tongue, and Izuku shakes it away quickly.

Forgotten Boy is gone with shrill laughter, leaving Izuku and the Mystery Man alone together in the alley. Great.

Izuku flips through the pages of his notebook, quietly seething.

All of his notes are ruined. The pages are soaked; he can barely read the words written in them. His drawings, theories, all of his hard work —destroyed. He can probably salvage some of it, sure, but it’s the fact that he has to do it at all that makes him angry.

A hand lands on his shoulder. “You alright, son?”

Izuku snaps the notebook shut and shoves it back into his hoodie pocket, glancing up at the taller man. “Oh, yeah! I’m, uh, I’m fine, sir, thanks. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Nonsense,” the blond says happily, retracting his hand. “I’m glad to help. Do they do that often?”

He sounds used to this. Is he a cop?

“Um, not really! They just like to play rough sometimes!” That sounds believable, Izuku thinks. The man probably *would* have believed it had he not just witnessed Izuku almost get the shit beat out of him.

“Uh-huh,” he says, brows scrunching suddenly. “Hey, you’re bleeding above your eye there, listener. Here.” The man digs in his back pocket for a moment before handing Izuku a bandaid, and looking closer, the boy can see a small print of a cat on the top.

Who the hell just carries a bandaid on them? Maybe he's more of a doctor?

Izuku wipes the trickle of blood off his forehead with his sleeve, thanking the man once more as he applies the bandage. He stands there for a moment after, the silence awkward as he realizes the stranger is studying him, before blurting out, “I have to get going, sir! I’m going to be late!”

He doesn’t wait for a reply as he runs out of the alleyway and disappears into the throng of people.

The man’s quirk had given off a strange, calming aura. It felt nice, in a way. Almost, dare Izuku say, *comforting.*

Again, he can’t shake the pressing feeling that he knows him from somewhere. There’s a strong possibility that he could be a cop, or maybe even a hero. In all fairness, his brain is too muddled from the bullies’ insults to think too much on anything else.

He ignores everyone’s stares and judgmental gazes, opting to instead continue on his way to the embroidery store. It closes pretty early, so he has to hurry. After that, he’ll finish his other plans.

It’ll take a few hours, but if he does it right he should have enough time to go to Tony’s for free breadsticks again!

At least the day had started out shitty, he thinks. Now it can’t get

worse, it can only get better from here.

Right?

“You have his phone number.”

It’s not a question. Shouta hopes the disappointment is evident on his face as he stares at the text Tsukauchi apparently received from Rabbit himself.

Nezu let him off work a little early, as expected, so now he’s here, at the station, having to deal with this bullshit.

The detective has the decency to look a little sheepish as he replies, “Well, yeah. I don’t know how he got it, but he started texting me a week or so ago.”

“Did you find a location?” Shouta takes the phone and scrolls up, reading the rest of the messages. Maybe the kid left a clue or something. A hidden message.

“Nope.” Tsukauchi spins in his rolling chair, blowing out an annoyed breath. “The number is private. It’s a burner phone, by the looks of it. But the fact that he uses emojis throws out that idea. It has to be a smartphone.”

“He’s childish,” Shouta observes. The vigilante really does use an excessive amount of emojis.

No doubt on purpose to give them this inner dilemma on what kind of phone he’s using.

“Or he just likes to piss people off,” Tsukauchi offers. “You told me before that he’s likely trying to come off as innocent so the heroes won’t try to arrest him.” He tilts his head in thought. “And also so we’ll underestimate him.”

Shouta hands the phone back, huffing when he reads the latest text again: *I lived, bitch.*

Honestly, it’s so corny that it’s not even funny.

The message was sent at around eight in the morning, which is interesting in itself. It followed a string of messages from Tsukauchi, who'd asked the vigilante if he survived his latest stunt. The detective was obviously worried.

“You think he’s injured?” Shouta asks, turning back to the holographic whiteboard. “The time frame between the incident and when he answered you is short, considering he jumped out of a helicopter.”

Tsukauchi stands up and drags a video file with his pointer finger onto the whiteboard. He expands it so it starts to play, showing the last minute of the warehouse fight. “He didn’t get injured too badly here. The most he got was a strike to the knee, but it doesn’t look like the bone shattered.”

Shouta narrows his eyes at the display. The vigilante is efficient in this type of scenario. He seems to have a lot of experience in dealing with multiple targets at once while also minimizing property damage.

Well. At least before he set the place on fire.

Shouta pauses the video just as the first spark of flame leaches into the air beside Rabbit’s figure and starts to spread over the dry wood of the warehouse. “That could be a fire quirk. I don’t see use of any implement.”

The detective shakes his head. “Previous encounters have shown that Rabbit does have a flamethrower. Homemade, by the looks of it, so we couldn’t search the records to find out who’s bought one in the past couple of years.”

“His file says he has basic enhancements,” Shouta continues. “If we narrowed down everyone in Japan based on his build and features, we’d still get nowhere. Ten percent of this country has a basic enhancement quirk, if we’re to be broad. There’s no way we could limit that range any further.”

“Despite the chances, we still tried to do so. By the end, we still had around nine thousand potential suspects. We don’t have enough information to narrow it down more. It’s a dead-end, as of the moment.”

Shouta rubs a hand down his face. He brings up another video file, this time of the most well-known part of the incident; the one with Rabbit taking a spectacular dive off a spiraling helicopter. “The only thing we don’t know is how he managed to survive this.”

Tsukauchi speaks up again. “We spoke to the young girl yesterday. She was present at the time he allegedly smashed into her hotel room window.” His voice takes on an amused tone. “The only thing she could give us was a clue to his voice. She said he sounded a little weird when he apologized to her, and his words were a little choppy.”

There’s one explanation for that, one that Shouta has been pondering for a while.

“He might have a voice changer. I doubt he bought it with how smooth it sounds most of the time. Same with the flamethrower, he must’ve made it himself.”

“That’s what I thought. All of the weapons he’s used, they’re all one of a kind.” Tsukauchi drags up a few grainy photos of Rabbit’s support items, exiting out of both videos. A bōstaff is more prominent among the pictures, along with a few dozen knives and capture wires. “My team can’t find any of these on the market, even illegally.”

“So he’s incredibly smart,” Shouta concedes. “Or has a few amazing clients.”

The other man nods. “There’s also a chance he wears contacts. We have no proof, but we have to keep that theory on the table. What I’m hoping is that you can get some information from him.”

And *that* has Shouta turning to look at the detective, hands shoved deep inside his pockets. He’s too tired for this shit today. “You want me to initiate contact?”

“I don’t think you should capture him just yet,” Tsukauchi says after a moment of pause. “Just talk to him about what we’re offering. Maybe he’ll come to his senses.”

Shouta can’t help but snort. “I have a feeling he knows I’ve been keeping tabs on him. He won’t take too kindly to me talking to him. He’ll instantly be on the defensive.”

Tsukauchi grins. “Well, there’s only one way to find out how he’ll react, isn’t there?”

For what seems like the millionth time today, Shouta sighs. He longs for his sleeping bag. “I’ll try to see if I can talk to him in the next few days.”

The man thanks the underground hero sincerely, but Shouta just rolls

his eyes and makes for the door.

“Just don’t expect anything big to come out of it. I know people who used to act like him before, and I know you know who I’m talking about. Chances are he’s going to laugh in my face and disappear on me again, perhaps permanently this time.”

If he messes this up, everything might crumble. The progress they’ve made will have to be restarted.

For the kid’s sake, Shouta hopes that won’t have to happen.

Chapter End Notes

s

actions speak louder

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Now that he’s thinking about it, Izuku has never been to Tony’s Pizzeria this early. It’s around three o’clock in the afternoon, an hour or so before Kacchan gets out of school.

He doesn’t know why he’s keeping tabs on his friend all of a sudden, but the words of his bullies are still ringing in his ears, and he wants to make sure Kacchan is alright, even though he knows he most definitely is.

The explosive teen won’t let anything get him down, a trait that Izuku both envies and hates at the same time.

Anyway, Izuku usually only goes to Tony’s in the evening time, when it’s already dark outside and he’s about to go on patrol or head home. But since he's passing by, he figures it's time to break that cycle.

While he waits for his order of one Dr. Pepper and a side of breadsticks, Izuku pulls out his damaged notebook, along with a brand new one he bought at the department store after getting some supplies to fix his costume.

It comes with two pens and some sticky notes, making it perfect for his analyses. And what makes it even better is that it was only a few dollars! The manager gave him a discount since he has a surplus of them in storage.

Izuku thinks it might also be because he looks a little homeless, but that's beside the point.

He opens both notebooks and sets them beside each other, comparing the pages. It's safe to say that his original journal is destroyed beyond repair—the paper has dried pretty much completely, leaving streaks of black and red ink from where he'd written notes and theories. He can read a little bit of it, as the puddle was only so deep, but his sketches are all mostly ruined, along with his analyses of the more recent pro heroes and villains.

It's a good thing he doesn’t care much about those. He's already memorized everything in those sections, after all. Every time he

studies a new person or group, the information gets lodged inside his brain. It's more like common knowledge to him now.

The only thing he's worrying about is the notes he had on himself. Or, more specifically, on his *quirks.* He's still adding on to those sections little by little, sometimes every day and sometimes every other day. It just depends on his findings.

The thing about his quirks is that he doesn't know everything about them yet, so he still has to have a baseline down for them in his notebook. He can add on to them easily that way. That's why he's prioritizing copying those sections over from his old journal to his new one rather than his other, less important stuff.

He titles the notebook #15-2, in honor of its original, and doesn't waste any time in transferring the information. The only good thing about this is that he now has the chance to sort through his scribbled notes and make a more detailed, neater version. He uncaps his blue ballpoint pen and gets to work, humming under his breath.

Property of Midoriya Izuku. If found, please return to the nearest police station :)

That's all he's going to write on the first page. It's not like he's going to put down his phone number or address—*what address,* he thinks sourly, *the abandoned building I've taken claim to?*

Izuku has a criminal record, albeit not a terribly violent one, so if he loses it and it gets turned into a police station, it'll most likely come back around to Tsukauchi. The detective will hold it for him. At least, Izuku thinks he will.

He makes sure to write in code in case someone gets their hands on it and plans to use this information against him. Other than that, it takes a relatively small amount of time for him to get through the different sections. It's a little bit tedious, but he prefers handwritten notes since he has a very rational fear of someone being able to uncover all of his digital documents on his computer.

Ms. Hanako brings him his Dr. Pepper sometime in the middle of his furious jotting, and she doesn't look the least bit surprised at the cat bandaid on his forehead. She has the good sense not to mention it, and Izuku makes a mental note to give her a good tip (he'll just have to run fast so she doesn't try to give it back). Speaking of, how much money does he have left? He might just have to cash in his checks later on at the club.

But that's a matter for later. At the moment, Izuku is enjoying his soda and finishing his writing. The pen is smooth when he drags it on the paper, so he's having a little more fun than he probably should be.

Extract (M): *activation requires both hands; exclusively skin-to-skin contact, gloves or fabric blocks usage; effects are permanent, cannot give back or away; steals original, does not take a copy; mutation of quirk from the paternal side, offspring quirk cannot steal parent quirk or vice versa*

Izuku grimaces as he continues writing.

Cons: painful, leaves burn marks, immoral; Pros: could save a person dying due to quirk, more quirks = more versatile in combat; Use: villains, last resort only

It's admittedly a little bare for his liking, but it’s only a rough outline for now. He makes sure to leave a lot of room between sections.

Force: *f orced quirk activation; skin-to-skin, brief touches work; c an be used on two at once since one touch of a hand is required for each person; no cooldown, no limit to how many can be affected by it at a time; cannot control input or output; pushes victim to limit, often to the point of exhaustion or fainting*

The last note makes Izuku shudder when he remembers heavy liquid filling up his nose and bubbles racing one another to break the surface far above him. Cold enters his veins, and he shakes himself to get rid of the feeling.

Cons: extremely painful depending on the quirk of the user, expels a lot of energy, may be counterproductive; Pros: a quick way to get someone out of the way permanently

Technically, Extract has the same benefit, but Izuku isn't going to write that down for fear of spiraling again. He always likes to get the worst ones out of the way.

Deflect: *similar to transparent shield; could be better described as invisible glass; shatters at around 350 pounds of force or pressure; activated when arms are crossed in an x shape—must be held there for the entire duration; can successfully block bullets, knives, other variations of sharp weapons, blunt force trauma, gases, and more to add; unsuccessfully blocks attacks that are above 350 pounds of sheer force and repeated hits that bypass the regenerative aspects*

Yeah, Izuku isn't about to forget about that one dreadful night a

villain with a bodybuilder quirk kept hitting the shield over and over and over, adding up to about three hundred hits in ten seconds, and broke the shield to send Izuku flying through the concrete wall behind him.

He won't ever make that mistake again.

Cons: limited time to hold, current max time is seven and a quarter seconds; causes bloody nose and chronic migraines; Pros: solid defensive tool; blocks both long-range and close-range attacks; allows for mobility while shield is up

Izuku hasn't trained with this quirk a lot, honestly. He's used it before as Rabbit, but only a few times when it was necessary and also dark out, so no one could see it. It's more of an instinctive thing than anything.

If he trains more with it, the boy is sure he'll be able to increase the time limit.

Boost: *basic enhancements; provides an incredible supply of energy; increased strength, stamina, speed, hearing, and sight (will need to conduct more tests); used daily, almost always active*

In fact, that's the excuse Izuku always gives: *I can't help it, it's just always on! You can't arrest me for public quirk usage, that's not fair!*

Cons: higher metabolism means normal med doses will need to be tripled, along with food consumption; Pros: useful in nearly all situations, offensive and defensive means, great opportunities for escaping situations

He's starting on the last section when Ms. Hanako comes back over and places two orders of breadsticks on the table. "Sorry for the wait, dearie. Ouki burnt the first batch, which should frankly be impossible with the setup we have back there. He managed to do it, though, so here's an extra bag."

Izuku dips his head at her in thanks, suddenly struck with that same uncomfortably warm feeling he gets in his chest when people are being kind to him. "I appreciate it! Today's been rough."

The older lady nods, putting her hands on her hips. "Got a new journal, huh?"

"Yep! I kinda ruined the first one, but I don't mind."

“Hm.” She looks like she doesn’t believe him, but instead of calling him out on it, she pats him twice on the head and walks away. “If you need me, just holler.”

He munches on the breadsticks, sprinkling them with an ungodly amount of parmesan cheese and dipping them in marinara as he continues his work. He's glad for the food's timing, as he needs a slight distraction when it comes to this upcoming quirk.

Pull: *weak form of telekinesis that allows objects to be pulled towards the body as long as nothing is blocking the way; to activate, hold out one palm, have the object in sight, and imagine an invisible string attaching to it; can control how much force and speed to pull at, however, requires more concentration*

It's also not always reliable.

Cons: can only pull a max of 300 pounds currently; Pros: beneficial in both long-range and close-range attacks, good for retrieving weapons or providing distractions

Now that he’s finished with those sections, he can throw away his old notebook since he has no use for the old information. He can start anew with different theories and such in this one.

He makes sure to throw a few extra bills on the table before leaving, calling out a goodbye to Ms. Hanako and the only other person working. He’s not full by any means, but at least the breadsticks will make sure he’s not starving.

Izuku has a few choices. He can go home and get his dirty clothes to go to the nearest laundromat, or he can go home and get his Rabbit costume to get an early start on his patrol. He’s a little calmer than before, thanks to the food and the easy note-taking, so either of those options will suffice.

Well, he might as well do the cleaning today.

The air is cool outside. It may be the afternoon, close to evening, but it’s not nearly as hot as it could be. The streets are bustling with people, some of them in suits and some of them in casual clothing. Izuku spots a few heroes in the crowds, too. They look like they’re off duty.

He’ll go by the house, drop off his stuff from the stores, and get his laundry to go out again and clean it.

People give him strange looks as he weaves through the crowds, but it doesn't really make him upset. Again, he's used to it.

It is kind of annoying, but what can you do about it?

Izuku pulls out his notebook and writes little stuff down along the way. He passes by a few undercover cops and heroes, which serves as perfect practice for him to try and get out a quick analysis on people before they disappear.

It's more of a hobby now more than anything. Come to think of it, his note-taking is kind of stalker-ish.

He decides to go down the tunnel he takes sometimes on the way to his building. It offers him more privacy than the usual streets do, and it also helps Izuku get more ideas for weapons and support gear.

The bridge is quiet around this time—no cars or people passing by. It's nice. It causes a certain kind of comfort to settle of his freckled skin.

And this is where Izuku makes mistake number one: he lets his guard down.

He's so focused on sketching a prototype of a bōstaff that doubles as a katana that he doesn't hear what's going on behind him until it's too late. Usually he's more alert than this, but it's like the universe wants to stack every odd against him.

There's a shift in the air, and a squelching noise is heard a few yards back. Izuku whips around, only to freeze in his tracks at the sight before him.

A large, slimy creature is crawling out of the sewer hole, and as Izuku watches, it creates more of its sludge out of thin air. *That must be a quirk,* Izuku thinks quickly. *Which means this is a villain.*

His thinking is proven correct once a face appears in the middle of the sludge, along with sharp, jagged teeth that send shivers down Izuku's spine. Yellow eyes meet Izuku's green ones, and the boy suppresses a groan of pure frustration.

"You'll make a perfect skinsuit for me to hide in, kid," the creature grounds out, the words watery and dark.

And the next moment happens too fast for Izuku to process. He just barely manages to dodge out of the way when the sludge makes a

swipe at him, crossing the yards between them in less than a second. He doesn't get a chance to breathe, though, as brown and green tendrils shoot from the side of the creature's body and wrap around Izuku quicker than lightning. He's being pulled in before he can do anything about it, quickly being enveloped whole by the disgusting slime. As a last-minute decision, he throws his notebook and bag full of supplies somewhere out of view so his hard work won't get ruined once more and prepares himself.

What in the ass is happening right now? Oh, fuck, it's—

Izuku feels like he's floating. His body is being held up by the smelly sludge, and it slides down his throat like cold lava once the tendrils pry his jaws open. He gags, his lungs trying to draw in air, but it's no use. It clogs his ears and nose, cutting off his senses.

He's drowning, but it's a weird sensation, as he feels closer to flying right now.

Izuku can barely hear what the villain is gloating about now. Something about how he has to leave soon, how he didn't expect him to be in town, whoever *he* is.

He's choking, and it's slow and weightless, but his lungs burn so badly that he feels like he's being torn apart from the inside out. And for a moment, a very brief moment, he wants to close his eyes and sleep. He suddenly remembers what that bully said to him before fleeing out of the alley, and everything hurts ten times worse than before.

Surely there's a reason the boy said what he did. A reason for why he brought something up from their elementary school days. But Izuku can't really think of one with the way his brain is reacting in this situation. Perhaps this isn't the best time to be thinking of Tsubasa and the others.

Izuku is trying his best to move around to dislodge the villain, but the sludge is sticking to his skin and attempting to peel it right off his bones, and he's completely surrounded. It all happened so fast that Izuku is just annoyed now! Can his luck get any worse, for real?

Losing his patience, Izuku calls upon Boost and uses up some of the energy from his store to send his fist cracking forward through the slime. The sheer speed and force of the movement cause it to split apart with one easy line, freeing Izuku. The gunk splatters against the ground and walls of the nearby tunnel, but some of it lands on his feet and sticks him to the floor. He performs another superpowered kick to

dislodge himself, but soon more tendrils shoot out from the base of the body to capture him again.

"Woah, woah, now! Stop being difficult, you brat!" The face in the ball before him warns. "I just wanna use you for a little while! That's all!"

His main body is somewhere inside all of that, Izuku thinks, face shadowed as sludge races up his legs to regain control. The stench clouds his senses. He's certain there must be some chemical reagents in the fluids since they are making him feel so queasy. *I just have to send another blow directly through the middle without him dodging, and it'll split him in half. Then I—*

His thinking cost him too much time. In a split second, a tendril erupts from the creature's abdomen and wraps around Izuku's throat, dragging him in once more and tightening around him like a noose. This time, Izuku is suffocating for real. His vision blurs and no sound comes out of his mouth when he tries to speak.

This stuff is not warm and comforting and safe like one might think slime to be—it's cold and scary, and it fucking *burns.* He's even more certain there are some kinds of acidic substances making the man up.

He feels like the words the bullies spewed at him, funnily enough.

He musters up the last bit of his strength as black dots begin to corner his vision, because dammit this villain wants to end things quickly, doesn't he? And Izuku does not want to fucking die at the hands of this sewer rat, of all things! He uses Boost one last time to reach for the knife in his boot, hoping he can send the sharp side sailing through the sludge like it's butter for it to slice the physical body of the man and get the quirk to deactivate. He calls on all of his quirks to do something, *anything* against the goo suffocating him. He ignores the man's jeering words, and right now it feels like his lungs are about to shred themselves.

Izuku feels the first patch of skin begin to rip from his flesh to be replaced by thick sludge, and he swallows down a scream in favor of yanking his knife out of his shoe and taking blind aim. He can't see the main body, but he can vaguely sense it using Extract, so he can do it. The moment Boost invades his body and sends the knife flying forward, headed towards its mark, the cold suddenly vanishes, and Izuku is dropped unceremoniously to the ground.

The sky swims, and he swears he sees stars behind his eyelids as he lies on the grass, as still as death.

He doesn't bother getting up; his body is already trying to restore its reserves of energy, so he can't delay that. He should probably take a nap. Or would it be weird, seeing as he's literally in the middle of a pathway?

To be fair, he's in front of a tunnel nobody really uses. He's slept in worse places before. He may as well—

A hand starts lightly slapping his cheek sometime after he comes to this conclusion, rapidly and in quick succession. A hushed voice reaches his ears, and it sounds a little rough around the edges—or maybe Izuku is losing it.

"Hey, wake up! Hey!"

Izuku blinks against the sun in his eyes, staring at the shadowed figure above him. He frowns. *Who the hell has awakened me from—?*

"Oh, good! Thought I'd lost you there!"

Izuku's vision clears, and for a moment he wonders if he did die, for why else would there be a steaming giant that looks suspiciously like the number one pro hero hovering above him, crouching awkwardly? Perhaps he is imagining things; there is *no way* that All Might is standing three feet above him. All Might patrols this part of town four times a day: early in the morning, again at noon, then at around three in the afternoon, and finally at seven at night. It is not any of those times, so why would All Might be here? Granted, certain villain fights may have led him astray, a little outside of his normal routes, but what are the odds he was searching for the very villain Izuku was fighting?

The more Izuku stares, the more Extract responds. He feels something nasty bubbling up in his stomach, and he has just enough time to duck his head and twist his neck to throw up somewhere that is *not* on All Might's face. Bile drips from Izuku's lips as he heaves, and he shudders anxiously, chills wracking his frame.

His first thought afterward is *oh, so it is All Might,* and his second is *oh, fuck, it's All Might.*

Izuku has been in All Might's presence before, but never has he talked to him or gotten closer than ten feet from him. Mostly because Izuku is well aware of who he is to his father. He also knows everything that the hero in front of him stands for—and that is everything Izuku is not. To say they're mortal opposites would be an understatement;

simply put, Izuku can't be here right now.

He should leave. If Father finds out he got within even a *mile* of All Might, he'll—

There's a hand on Izuku's back, which makes sense, as the boy is still hunched over, contorted in a weird position on the harsh concrete. He stares at the vomit in front of his face, now extremely embarrassed.

“Oh, looks like you're moving around all right!” All Might says, and Izuku realizes with a start that he's spending too much time thinking. "You've thrown up the slime, so that's a good thing!"

Beneath his terror and trepidation lies excitement. Two idols. He's met *two* of his idols in just the past couple of weeks alone. Izuku is about to have a stroke.

Despite this realization, the boy shrugs the *very* large hand off and scrambles away, eyes wide as saucers. “I'm sorry, I need to—!" Izuku's mind goes blank, because what exactly is he looking at? There, lodged into a very wide shoulder, is a sleek black and red knife that has Izuku's initials engraved on the side. This means one thing: when Izuku threw his knife in an attempt to slice the main body of the villain, he hit All Might instead, who likely jumped in the way.

Somewhere, he thinks Father is laughing maniacally.

"Um," Izuku starts, throat dry. "I think that's my knife."

The hero jerks at the reminder. "Oh, yes! I forgot about that." All Might glances at the weapon and pushes a little on the handle, testing its give, before smiling widely at Izuku. More steam radiates off his body at the motion. "It's quite deep! Forgive me, young man, but I may have to keep it so I can get it removed in a more sterile environment. Though I don't think you'll end up getting it back, unfortunately; it seems a little big for state standards."

Izuku grabs his discarded journal and holds it to his chest, not worried about that in the slightest. At least the knife isn't one of his Rabbit ones. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry," he says numbly. "I just stabbed you."

"Not to worry!" All Might assures, standing to his full height and glory. His shadow casts over Izuku. "I don't even feel it! Besides, I should have seen it coming, honestly! You throw very fast and hard for your size—you should be proud!"

The boy averts his gaze, his cheeks reddening from the unexpected praise. He expected a lecture about not paying attention to his surroundings or being able to find a way out quickly, but he gets neither of those things. Why did he ever think All Might would be like that?

“Now, are you feeling alright? Any dizziness or lingering nausea?” The hero coughs a little into his hand.

"No, I'm fine, sir." Izuku jerks his head up when the man begins to walk swiftly away after tightening the lid of a bottle stuffed in his cargo pants. He must be keeping the villain in there. This proves Izuku's theory that it is like slime; one just has to contain it in an object that will prevent it from expanding. If only Izuku had one of his bombs on him when he got attacked—things would've been easy!

“Good! If you can, I advise you to be checked at an urgent care facility just in case of concussion, but for now, I must get going, my boy!” The hero crouches down as if preparing for a leap, the smoke coming off of him in waves now. Extract is rippling inside Izuku, warning him of something, but he doesn't pay any attention to it.

Izuku, who was momentarily stunned by *my boy,* jerks forward. "No, wait, please!"

His hand shoots up without really thinking about the consequences of doing so, palm facing outwards, and this is mistake number two.

Pull activates on its own accord, tingling at his fingertips, and Izuku is yanked forward a few feet, as the sheer force of All Might's jump was much greater than the maximum he can counter. To Pull's credit, the man glitches mid-air, freezing in place for a fraction of a section, before losing the momentum he needed. And then the behemoth of a hero is falling back down to the Earth several yards away from Izuku, landing sloppily in front of the tunnel's entrance. He darts inside the shadows the moment he finds his footing, and Izuku is prepared to turn around and *run* (did he actually just use his quirk on fucking All Might, right after stabbing him?) when a cloud of smoke explodes within the tunnel and fans out to greet him. It feels slightly moist, kind of like rainclouds, and Izuku shivers, pausing in his plans to escape. The mist clears then, revealing a tall, lanky man with blond hair and piercing blue eyes.

And that’s not All Might.

Well, it is. It’s just the man in his deflated form. Kind of like a balloon,

if you think about it. That's how Father explained it to him, anyhow. Izuku always called him Small Might, as it was easier to remember.

All Might never really had a time limit for how long he could stay in his muscle form until he fought Izuku's father, and this reminder lodges a lump in Izuku's throat. It seems the hero's time limit is getting shorter with each passing day. Izuku doesn't think the hero would let everyone know this secret of his willingly, so this must've been an unhappy accident.

Oh, that explains all the smoke. That's my fault.

"You're... not freaking out?" Small Might's astonished voice brings him out of his thoughts. "Are you sure you don't have a concussion? Why are you not surprised?"

That's right. Izuku shouldn't know about this; no one should. He needs to at least act like he's shocked. Should he scream? No, that'll look fake.

Honestly, fuck it. Izuku can just lie through his teeth like all the other times. He's incredibly done with this entire day, so this may as well just happen. He walks closer, checking his surroundings just in case there are any cameras or people walking around.

"Honestly, I already sort of guessed this, sir." Izuku rubs the back of his head. "I'm a fan, so I studied your moves, the time of your appearances, and the average duration of your fights back to back. At that point, I made the connection that you must have some kind of time limit."

Small Might's mouth drops open, blood spewing from between his teeth, and Izuku hurries to correct himself.

"Not in a creepy way! I didn't know about your other form, exactly! It just seemed plausible!" He wrings his hands together, hoping he looks nervous enough to be believable.

Once the hero stops coughing up a scarlet waterfall, he gives Izuku a grim look. "Young man, you must know that this is a very important, very *dangerous* secret. Have you told anyone else about this?"

Izuku doesn't know why he feels a little insulted at the accusation; he has no right to be. "Of course not. Even I know that it would ruin the whole of hero society if word got out. Plus, you'd be in even more danger, as you wouldn't be able to walk around without being

recognized anymore."

After a minute of contemplation, he gets a small, slightly confused *thank you* from the number one hero, and after another few moments of awkward silence—well, probably awkward to Small Might, not so much to Izuku—the man speaks up. “When I was attempting my jump, what did you do to me?"

The question, though edged, has no anger in it. Izuku is careful anyway.

He stares directly into Small Might's shadowed blue eyes and forces his body to quit trembling. "I did nothing, sir."

"Really?" Small Might searches his gaze in disbelief, but he must not find anything, as he shakes his head and retreats further into the shadows when the smoke clears completely. "I admit, I'm off my game today. First the knife, and now this.”

Izuku swallows dryly and forces what little courage he has to aid him. “Well, now that you're here, I have a question I've been wanting to ask you if that's okay."

"A question?"

"It’s not for me. It’s for a friend of mine.”

“Go on.”

He takes a deep breath. *Just go for it. What’s the worst that can happen? On second thought, don’t answer that.*

“He, uh, well... He wanted to ask if—if someone with a bad quirk can become a hero."

There’s a pause. The universe's eyes are on the pair of them.

“A bad quirk?” Small Might repeats. "As in, one that may not be very useful in heroics?"

Izuku shuffles, gaze on his feet. He kicks some of the gravel below him. “No, sir. Like... a quirk that’s thought to be more useful for villains than heroes.”

“Ah, so a 'villain' quirk?” Small Might clears his throat, and Izuku is suddenly aware of how different his voice is in this form, how much lower. His hands rub the cover of his notebook. “Before I can answer

that, I must ask: Why does your friend want to be a hero?"

Just tell him the truth, the wind whispers. *Tell him it all.*

“To help people, I think?" Izuku says softly. "To be someone that the people can look up to. So, when he's around, everyone knows they’re not in danger anymore." His eyes narrow some. "And... maybe to prove that he's not all bad like everyone says."

Small Might studies him silently, his eyes glazing over briefly, thinking about something Izuku is not privy to. “I believe anyone can be a hero if they try hard enough. A quirk does not make you who you are.”

Izuku’s stomach does this weird, swooping thing that makes his heart jump out of his chest, because that’s way better than he—

“Though, it's worth mentioning that it is very hard to deal with the discrimination that comes with having 'villain' quirks. Sometimes it may be better to look into another profession entirely because of it.” He tips his head in thought. “Police work or even a doctor would do. Those are very important jobs, and you'd still be connected to heroics. There are hundreds of other ways to be a hero, young man.”

What you're telling me is to go for something easier? But how can I do that with who I am?

“To answer your question, yes, I do think it’s possible. However, I don't think it should be your friend's goal, as oftentimes these aspiring heroes face terrible struggles from those around them—even from other pros, unfortunately. With that in mind, it may be better if they went for something else, for everyone involved.”

It’s the way the man says *they* that has Izuku’s mouth running dry. “Oh,” he says quietly. “that, uh, makes sense. Thanks.”

Why is Izuku surprised?

He doesn’t know how long he stands there for, eyes focused on nothing, really, but when he comes to, All Might is gone, just like that, leaving Izuku alone at the mouth of a dark tunnel.

Izuku doesn’t know what to think. He didn’t expect any sort of real answer when he first asked the number one hero the question. But he also never thought he’d get this sort of reaction.

He's right, though, isn't he? You've known it yourself, all this time. You just never wanted to admit it. There's a reason suicide rates for those with villain quirks are higher than any other.

Something heavy settles in his stomach, making the boy regret eating those breadsticks. He wants to throw up again.

Hearing those words from his favorite hero? It's just strengthened the walls around his mind and heart. He shouldn't care so much. Why is he so upset? And why is he so sad? So angry?

Izuku asked. All Might answered. So who's really at fault?

Great. He started out having a shitty day and had breadsticks to try and make it better, only to have those efforts ruined just a few minutes later. That's just his luck, right?

The walk home is short. It takes him only a few minutes to get there from where All Might left him. He retrieves the bag of supplies he left by the bridge and trudges up the various flights of stairs—it's broad daylight; he can't climb up it this time.

When he opens his notebook, he is surprised to find All Might's signature scrawled across two whole pages in black ink. It's something that Izuku never thought he would ever get the chance to have, and if it were any other time, he'd be delighted, but now he only feels subdued.

He feels too upset to do laundry now, so he puts on his Rabbit costume and turns right back out the door.

Going on patrol makes everything better. He can forget everything for a few hours, at least.

That last part was a lie.

Izuku's fantastic luck strikes again only twenty minutes into his patrol.

By this point, he's already stopped two muggings and helped an older man cross the street, so that's cool. Now, however, he's gliding across rooftops and relishing in the feeling of cool air hitting his face, unaware of what's to come

There's commotion a little ways away. He extends his senses and finds various quirks grouped together near an open alleyway, making him frown. *A villain fight, huh?*

It takes him less than a minute to have a bird's eye view of the scene. The first thing he notices is, well, the star of the show: the villain.

The villain that All Might *should have brought to the fucking police station.* The one that Izuku nearly suffocated in not even an hour before.

That green and brown sludge is unmistakable. It's definitely the same guy.

Oh, shit, Izuku thinks with horror making an home out of his skin. *Did he drop it when I yanked him out of the air? Did he not see it? How didn't* I *see it!*

The more Izuku thinks about it, the faster he comes to the conclusion. The jar probably dropped and rolled right back into the storm drain that the villain first came out of—which would've broken the bottle if it hadn't been already, freeing the monster.

Arrogant and stupid. That's what Izuku is. He should've seen it. He should've known that the villain wouldn't give up so easily! He's been trained for this kind of stuff, and yet he still somehow *missed it!*

If he had only checked for the villain's quirk signature and not let himself be distracted by All Might, it wouldn't have escaped.

The second thing Izuku notices is that quite a few heroes are already on the scene. Except they're not exactly doing much of anything. The heroes are *standing* there. Does the villain have a hostage or something? Why are the heroes trying to keep back the press and civilians instead of trying to take down the fool and minimize property damage? He is, as a matter of fact, standing between two apartment buildings where families reside. This is a high risk situation!

Aren't they going to help?

The idea of a hostage becomes a little more realistic once he catches sight of a figure near the front of the goo. Izuku hops onto the corner of the roof to get a better look.

And that's when he sees it: a tuft of spiky blond hair peeking out from

the sludge, along with a familiar school-issued uniform.

Kacchan?

School's been out for half an hour. They're a few blocks away from the Bakugou household, which is around thirty minutes from Aldera Middle School.

The time stamps match up. It could very well be him. And the heroes *still aren't doing anything.*

Izuku is moving before he can stop himself, his muscles burning from the sudden use of his enhancements. Suspended in midair for a fraction of a second after his jump, Izuku hikes up his knee and digs a knife out of his boot—this one *with* his Rabbit initials on the side.

His precision is deadly, and light reflects off polished metal as the blade soars through the air and hits the villain's exposed eye.

The sludge recedes briefly, just enough for Izuku to see more of Kacchan's body and skin.

He's suffocating!

When he flies close enough, the vigilante brings his leg down on an outer piece of the sludge, tearing a large chunk off of it and sending it far away from the villain's grasp.

He hits the ground running, hand already reaching for his friend's exposed forearm. Wide, panicked crimson eyes meet his, and Izuku yanks. Kacchan is almost fully out of the sludge now; his leg and torso are the only things still stuck.

Izuku rears back with a grunt and aims another kick at the floating face, shoving the knife further into its eye. Juice sprays out, splattering both Izuku and Kacchan.

The screech he gets in reply grates on his ears, but he feels a tiny bit of satisfaction at the noise.

He uses *Pull* on his friend again in tandem with his yanking, knowing that his back will obscure what his hands are doing from the cameras. Kacchan is jerked forward slightly, and he frantically lets off a few large explosions to try and break the rest of the way free.

What can I do, what can I do—?

Izuku fumbles for the small grenade in his belt, nearly dropping it as he pulls the pin and chucks it at the far side of the villain, as far away from Kacchan as possible.

This grenade isn't like his pink bomb, which is made for detaining smaller criminals and heroes who are chasing him. No, this is the grenade Izuku uses for the Big Boys.

This is his last one, too. It cost him a hell of a lot to make.

The sludge absorbs it immediately, just as Izuku hoped, and the boy can see the moment the villain realizes his mistake, as he lets out an ear-splitting screech.

It's too late, though, as the sludge explodes from the inside, effectively destroying the base and causing some of the slime to dissipate. *Thank fuck for physics!*

Kacchan slips free, stumbling to the ground and coughing up black liquid. Izuku tries to drag him away, only for a furious roar to make him look up.

The sludge has expanded to twice its original size in just under a second, and it's now looming over the two boys, bearing down on them monstrously.

Oh, fuck you! You're gonna make me use one of my other quirks, you sack of—

His desperation and fear wins over all his other emotions; Izuku crouches over Kacchan and throws his arms up in an *x,* eyes squeezed shut.

Deflect comes to him naturally, and Izuku waits for the blow, waits for the sludge to envelope them both. He's aware of the heroes and crowd screaming something behind him. They must've been screaming the entire time, he just never realized it.

But the blow never comes.

The ground shakes. Izuku doesn't risk letting go of Deflect even as a large shadow washes over them—not even when, a moment later, a familiar, *booming* voice shouts out, *"Wyoming Smash!"*

All Might.

Izuku is left with a striking feeling of déjà vu when the sludge villain is reduced to a million pieces, and it's only by instinct that he grabs Kacchan before they both go flying. The shockwave is large, and chunks of sludge smack Izuku in the face like the *ultimate* bitch slap. The two of them land with a hard thud on the concrete, rolling forward a few feet.

Izuku covers Kacchan with his body again until the wind dies down, and he can't help but sigh in relief at the realization that Kacchan is *safe, he's not dead, thank God!* He flops onto his back once the commotion dies down, still a little dazed.

Fuck, All Might. I knew I needed you, but holy shit. I love you, sir. All homo.

His euphoria is interrupted by Kacchan socking him in the shoulder. "Why the hell did you do that?" The blond barks, eyes flaming. "We would've both been dead, dumbass!"

Izuku sits up and chuckles, making sure his mask and hood are still in place. *The last thing I need is an impromptu face reveal.*

"Glad you're still alive," he says quietly, making sure no one else can hear them.

"Shitty nerd, I'll kill you!" Kacchan reaches for him again, but Izuku dodges out of the way, already on his feet.

The explosive teen would've chased after him had a hero not run forward and grabbed the boy's arm, directing him to the nearest medic. Everyone starts to crowd around him, some asking if he's alright and others just telling him how brave he was, staying calm under the circumstances he was in.

Good. At least they're doing something now. *After* the fact.

Izuku glances around and notices that All Might has already given the villain to the police, and he's answering questions from the press with an awkward hand rubbing at the nape of his neck. There is a slight sheen of steam coming off of his back, but it's much less than it was before.

Now it's time for me to leave.

He picks up his discarded knife from the ground and wipes the remaining sludge on his costume, figuring that he might as well seeing

as he's going to wash it later.

He's about to leave when a hero calls to him from beside a police officer, stepping forward pointedly. He's obviously hesitant to capture the boy after what he just did but also isn't willing to let him go.

Izuku holds his knife threateningly and turns on him, his voice icy as that righteous anger comes back to him in full force. "Are you fucking blind or something?"

Everything comes to a standstill. The chatter from the heroes and press stops at once when everyone snaps around to stare at the vigilante.

"He was suffocating!" Izuku gestures in the air with his blade, pointing at the man now restrained in the police car. "That bastard over there was going to kill him, and you all just sat there and did jack shit!"

He's breathing heavily now, and he vaguely notices all of the cameras being turned on him and the reporters holding out their microphones. All Might has disappeared from view, though Izuku can still feel his quirk nearby.

A woman to the far right of him shifts on her feet, jutting her chin out defiantly. "None of our quirks were suited for the job. We would've made the situation much worse—"

"Worse? What situation is worse than letting someone die because your quirks *weren't suited* for saving him?" Izuku walks forward, flipping the knife repeatedly in the air out of nervousness. "Is that what heroes do? Let people die?"

Another one with hoses for hands shakes his head. "Of course not! We had a plan."

Izuku ignores him, not wanting to waste his breath on a walking fire hydrant. "Unless your plan was waiting around for someone stronger to show up, I doubt that. How useless *are* you guys, really? I'm not suited for dealing with a villain like that either, but that didn't stop me! You guys were okay with doing nothing as he tried to use a civilian as a skin suit, huh?"

No one interrupts him this time. Most of the heroes and policemen look ashamed, uncomfortably moving around and looking at the ground. It's kind of funny, Izuku thinks, how they all look like they've

just gotten scolded by their parents.

He's only a little surprised that no one is trying to capture him. He just helped save a boy—not just anyone, *Kacchan*—from a villain, and the cameras most likely captured it all. If they were to arrest him now, there'd probably be some sort of protest.

Izuku crosses his arms, the knife held tightly in his grip. "Did hero school teach you guys nothing? Or the police academy? You're supposed to help people. Not wait around for someone like All Might to save the day, though I guess that's the easier thing to do, right?" He has to wrap this up. He can see Kacchan glaring at him from the corner of his eye. "I can't believe how shitty the system is these days. It doesn't matter what kind of quirk you have, or lack thereof. You could be quirkless or a mutant for fuck's sake—it doesn't matter! What matters is your brain and how you use it. You guys obviously never realized that."

Izuku doesn't know why he's ranting like this. Maybe it's because All Might's words are still fresh in his mind, along with his bullies'. He's getting too passionate about this. It's time to go, for real this time!

He lets the silence after hang in the air for a few moments, as if to let what he said sink in, before blowing out an annoyed breath. "Pussies," he spits, ignoring the surprised murmur from the crowd.

Shakily, Izuku lets some extra energy flow to his legs and jumps onto the nearby café, running along the rooftops until he's out of sight, not answer the calls of his vigilante name behind him.

Fuck. He said too much. *Stupid, stupid!*

His phone is buzzing nonstop as he runs, but Izuku is too angry to answer the texts.

It's probably Kacchan. He heard the blond's voice among the others calling after him. He probably wants to yell at him again. Or maybe it's Tsukauchi, as Izuku might've just been on the news again.

This time was purely accidental, though. Well, sort of.

Doesn't matter. He can't do anything about it now. All he knows is that it's time to hurt some bad guys.

Whenever Izuku is upset, he sleeps on the floor.

It's completely ridiculous and totally irrational to an outside person, but it's a habit he picked up after his mother left him. The first night with his supposed father, Izuku laid on that hard mattress and stared up at the clean ceiling with tired eyes.

And it was at that moment that everything changed. Nothing felt *certain* after that.

Even these days, nothing ever feels right.

Izuku just needs something concrete to hang onto every now and then, so he curls up on the floor and sleeps.

He used to do it all the time under the care of his father, used to require the comfort of a hard floor beneath himself, something sure to cling onto in the midst of his spiraling thoughts and splintering words, as he'd surely never be given that comfort by anyone else.

It doesn't make sense, but these things never really do. They just are.

And so Izuku paces the run-down kitchen on the top floor of his building, his head pounding. This building hasn't had anyone live in it (legally, at least) in two decades, so the boy doesn't know why he's stressing so much. It's not like anyone is going to waltz in here and demand he leaves.

Maybe because he's just put himself under All Might's radar, both as Midoriya Izuku and as Rabbit.

Why can't I just keep my mouth shut? Everything would be so much easier.

But no, Izuku just had to start ranting about a flawed system of heroes and police. How having a certain quirk defines your worth and your duty.

He was only able to patrol until midnight before his thoughts took over. He could barely concentrate the entire night, earning him a few more bruises than he honestly should've earned, skillfully speaking.

Kacchan could have died. *Died.*

Every time Izuku thinks about it, he starts to shake a little more. His only friend, the person who has stayed by his side for far longer than

his own mother and father had.

He could have died. Would have, if not for Izuku's small distraction and All Might's quick save.

Izuku should have been faster. Should have realized the sludge villain still posed a threat to civilians even when he thought the Symbol of Peace was holding it. If he'd been even a minute late, Kacchan would have suffocated.

And those heroes just stood by and did nothing. They watched. They kept back the reporters and tried to calm everyone down, which would've made Izuku a little less angry had Kacchan not been in immediate danger with no one willing to help.

It'd be foolish to blame those heroes personally, though. Rather, Izuku points the blame at the system that allowed this to happen.

And he said as much, in front of everyone and the cameras. He spewed out his distaste, aware that if he didn't leave soon, the heroes would try to capture him.

He was stupid. He should've left when All Might took care of the situation. He should've disappeared as soon as he made sure Kacchan was okay.

But he didn't, and there's nothing he can do about it now. His alter ego is trending on four different social media platforms. He's in the public eye.

Izuku can't tell if that's good or bad. The only reason he's kept his identity a secret so far is because he's avoided cameras. The more he talks and acts out in front of people, the more chance there is of someone connecting Rabbit to Midoriya Izuku.

The chance is slim, but it's still there. And it's enough to make Izuku panic even more.

So many things have happened today; he ran into some of his old bullies, met All Might, then the same man in his deflated form, and then helped save Kacchan from the same sludge villain that tried to wear his skin as a suit.

It makes Izuku's head spin, and that's how he finds himself lying on the cold ground next to his couch. He doesn't have a bed right now since he sold his previous one for extra cash, and he'd rather not pick

one out of the garbage just yet. The couch is where he usually sleeps, but sometimes it gets too soft for him. Like now.

It's one of those days where he needs to have something hard beneath him. Something concrete.

He probably won't be able to fall asleep, though, but that's the least of his worries.

There's a slight, gnawing pain in his stomach all of a sudden. Now that he's thinking about it, he's felt it ever since the sludge villain attacked him, just not this bad.

That's right. I haven't eaten since those breadsticks. And they barely filled me up.

He should probably make himself some of that instant ramen. It'd just be cold.

Well. He could put iced coffee into the ramen to give it more flavor. Maybe to distract him from the fact that it's cold and not cooked.

Huh. Maybe when I'm more awake.

He stares at the dusty ceiling and thinks about how this day could've been better. The only highlight was the food.

"This sucks," he says aloud, to no one in particular.

The silence he gets in return drapes over him like a blanket, and Izuku closes his eyes to continue pretending to sleep until the next morning, hoping tomorrow will prove to be a little better.

Chapter End Notes

m

an ultimatum

Chapter Notes

> okay we just recently hit over 6k hits, and I just??? Love you guys??? So much??? I honestly didn't think so many people would like this, but I'm so so glad you all do? I only got this one out on time because you all inspire me sm—especially with your comments!! I do read all the comments, I just can't always respond to them! I love them all, so thank you so much!!
>
> this story is bringing me a lot of joy to write, and im glad you guys seem to like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku feels like an oxymoron.

He steals. He stops people from stealing.

He breaks into places. He stops muggings and robberies.

He hurts people. He stops people from hurting others.

Granted, the criminals he hurts aren't good people in the slightest, but Izuku knows it doesn't make it okay.

He can't find it in himself to care, though, because he has this need to just do what's *right.* He also needs food and money, which his clients provide him with when he gets his jobs done.

Sometimes the only way to survive is to break the law and get on Detective Tsukauchi's last nerve. Which is an added bonus, in Izuku's humble opinion.

Forgive him, but he will do anything—commit any nonviolent crime no matter the size—if it means he can survive for another day. Because if he lives, he can help others.

That's just how being homeless works.

Sometimes, Izuku gets lucky. Sometimes, people are so grateful to him as Rabbit that they offer him money or food if they can spare it.

It used to make him uncomfortable. He started being a vigilante

because he wanted to help people. He never meant to get anything in return, except maybe a slightly clearer conscience to help him pretend to sleep at night.

But then the heroes started taking interest in him, and the game changed a little.

No, a *lot*.

He then couldn't stay in the same spot for more than a couple days for fear of one of the pros catching him. He could no longer take his time patrolling the city; he's almost been caught by police more than once. He has the scars from his trip-ups to prove it. Now he has to speed run through his routes and go over them multiple times to make up for his haste.

At least Izuku can be a vigilante. If he can't be a hero, he can at least be that. There are less restrictions that way anyway.

So now Izuku gets to feel like a hypocrite. Because he takes and he takes and he takes, and being a vigilante is the only way he knows how to give back.

The rage he feels towards villains and people in general sometimes threatens to consume him, so he slides his mask on and does what he does best.

He runs towards the danger and prepares for a fight.

Tonight is no different. He got a tip from one of his clients that there's going to be a large human trafficking auction happening downtown. There's supposedly going to be around thirty kids there, all ranging from ages eleven to nineteen.

It sounds normal. Easy. Familiar.

So of course, he should've known that life hates his guts. As if he couldn't catch a break between having to jump out of a helicopter so he wouldn't be blown up and then having to save Kacchan from a freaky sludge villain, now he's stuck having to take down a trafficking ring with an undesirable amount of guards around it.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

If Izuku is anything, he's quiet. He presses himself to the wall and blends in with the shadows, happy that the dark green of his suit

allows him that advantage. He barely breathes, instead becoming one with his surroundings.

People are talking right below him. Harsh, barked voices, overlapping each other as they communicate.

They're speaking in English, that much is obvious. Izuku thanks the skies above that his shitty father had at least taught him that. Between six different languages, English was the hardest to grasp.

"Where the hell is he?"

"He said he's running late, don't get your panties in a twist."

Izuku inches alongside the edge of the wall to hear them better.

There's four of them directly below him in a tight circle, dressed in suits. Looks cheap, Izuku notes. So they must not be too important. Or they're gun-for-hires.

Which makes this a little bit harder. But also a bit more fun.

So far, no sign of the hostages. There are apparently a lot, so they won't be too hard to miss. They're likely in a room off to the side, waiting for the rest of the participants to arrive. Likely guarded, too.

He can see the guns slung over the men's backs, so he knows they mean business.

Now, Izuku isn't sure if this is the dealing part of the trade. This could be, as bad as it sounds, the viewing part. Where the buyers come and look and then later decide on the price.

But if this is just a pick-up, where these mercenaries are probably just here to make sure everything runs smoothly, then things just got a whole lot more difficult. Because this means his time frame will be cut short.

He'll have to be quick with this. There's also a chance a third party might come in, as the buyers surely have their own bodyguards.

Izuku glances back down and notices more people coming from a side hallway. The abandoned warehouse—*why is it always in an abandoned building,* Izuku thinks, *be more creative, guys*—is dark, lit only by a few well-placed lamps and candles.

It's just enough light for Izuku to make out their faces.

"It starts in ten minutes. He should be here by now, seeing as he's the one who's operating it!"

Oh, spill it.

Izuku thinks about how funny it would be if he were to drop down right beside them like *I know right? He's such a drag*—but he ultimately decides not to. He'll make sure to do one for the memes later on.

"Watch your mouth. If he hears you say that—"

The one who first spoke turns on his friend, gesturing with his gun. *"He'll what? Sell me? That's all he's good for."*

Okay, Izuku would love to hear more of the roast fest going on, but he has kids to locate.

Dumb and Dumber #1 told him that *it* apparently starts in ten minutes. Meaning he has just short of that to secure the victims and start to get them out.

Ten minutes. He's done it in less time before, but not nearly with this many people to evacuate.

Can't wait to tell Kacchan about this shit. He's gonna flip.

Izuku balances on the beam he's crouching on and shuffles forwardly quietly, making his way into the ventilators. It's just big enough for him to squeeze through, and it's not too hot.

He's not very good with enclosed spaces in areas he isn't familiar with, but as long as he's got a way out, he'll be okay. Besides, he's doing this to help the kids stuck in this shithole. He can deal.

His watch tells him it's five minutes before ten, so he's gotta hurry if he wants to finish this before eleven. He promised Kacchan he'd go with him to the mall tomorrow, so he has to leave enough time to finish up his other work before then as well.

Izuku stops by a hatch and peers down the slits into an empty hallway. There's no noise, so he keeps going, ingraining the location in his mind.

It's been a few days since the sludge villain attacked him, and thus a few days since he saved his friend and ranted to the press about how dumb heroes are. Not his best moment, for sure, but definitely one of

his ballsiest.

His patrols have been relatively quiet, granting Izuku a little bit of a reprieve from the chaos and exposure he's received lately. He can still feel those eyes on him, though. They get closer with each passing day. It's only a matter of time before whoever is following him decides to pay him a visit.

Izuku has a good idea on who it is.

Static crackles below him, and he pauses once more, peeking through the nearest vent hatch in interest.

"Everything okay over there?"

Ooh. They're speaking in Japanese this time.

A tall, bulky man is pacing back and forth in the middle of the walkway, dressed in the same attire as the previous guys. He, however, has a thick bulletproof vest on, obviously being more of a fighter.

He looks like he could crush Izuku's skull in between his biceps. The boy shudders at the thought.

It's the radio sitting on Crusher's hip that made the noise. Someone is checking in on his position.

"All clear. How much longer?"

Crusher has a Russian accent, is speaking Japanese, and carries himself like he's German. All while being involved in a trafficking ring with a bunch of American English-speakers.

The flavor here is immaculate.

Izuku carefully lifts up the vent, grateful that he's small enough to fit through, and waits for an opening. He'll have to be extra careful, as he has no clue what this guy's quirk is.

He isn't very keen on finding out, either. That can come later, once the people responsible for this have been interrogated by the police and their names have been filed.

Makes for good analysis practice.

"Boss is late. Standby."

Crusher turns his back towards Izuku, walking another few feet before stopping. “Clear.”

That looks like an opening, don’t you think? The voices in Izuku’s head, for once, don’t answer, and the boy drops down silently, slinking forward until he’s right behind the man.

“Boo.”

It’s almost comical how quickly Crusher whips around with wide eyes, hand reaching for his gun on instinct. “You—”

Izuku doesn’t give him a chance to finish, his fist pulling back and smashing into his face with what’s probably excessive force. The punch is so strong that the man drops like a rock, knocked unconscious.

Blood leaks like a steady faucet from his nose, and Izuku frowns. Excessive? Yes. Necessary? Absolutely.

He bends down and takes the gun from the man’s grip, eyes already running over it to figure out what kind it is.

It’s heavy, but not as heavy as Izuku expected. He’s only a little surprised when he recognizes the tranq darts sitting inside.

So he must be one of the keepers. He’s in charge of making sure the kids are behaving. Meaning they’ve gotta be close by.

Izuku slings the gun over his shoulder and kicks Crusher off to the side, hoping no one will stumble across him and sound an alarm.

He speed walks down the dark hallway, peeking around corners and opening all of the doors he passes. Five minutes left.

He just about crashes into a woman running by, and it’s only by instinct that he drops to the ground and slides forward, knocking her feet out from under her.

She shoots a tranq dart, and it barely misses him when it bounces off the floor and shatters.

Izuku is behind the kneeling agent now, and he simply cocks his own gun and aims two darts at her, not willing to have a full-on fight with her.

He’s already running to continue his search when her radio cackles.

“Nova, what was that sound?”

Nova. That’s an interesting nickname. She must have a force quirk or something, or maybe a fire quirk.

Which reminds him that he’s going into this whole thing blind. It’s not usually like this. Any other time, Izuku would have already known the participants and their powers, and he’d have developed a plan that best suited his mission. But now, Izuku thinks faintly that he might need some backup.

“Nova?” The radio crackles again.

Time to go.

The boy digs into his pockets for his phone, shooting off a quick text to a certain detective with the address of the warehouse. After a moment’s hesitation, he adds the number thirty after the words. Hopefully the man will get what he means. He only adds one emoji this time: a clown face.

Izuku clenches his teeth and takes off, extending his senses as far as they will allow. *Come on, search, search. Feel for their energies, Rabbit.*

Extract doesn’t just allow him to take quirks and their properties, it gives him an acute sense of the quirks themselves and of where they are. On some occasions, Izuku can pick out who the person is just on the energy or power their quirk, or lack thereof, exudes.

But the splitting headache that nearly has him crumpling in pain usually stops him from using it to this extent.

While he can feel the energies of the people closest to him on the daily, since that part of Extract seems to always be active, he can never really feel them when they’re a long ways away.

Not unless he’s really searching. Like now.

On the left. There’s a bunch of people in that storage room up ahead.

Izuku rounds the corner, shooting the two guards closest to him with ease while dodging the fucking *bullet* that grazes his ear. The boy eyes the culprit, who’s standing protectively in front of the double doors housing the kids. He’s smaller than his fellow counterparts, but he seems to stand much taller.

“Get outta here, brat, if you know what’s good for you.”

Cocky fucker. He’s also speaking English—the drawl tells Izuku he’s from the southern United States.

Izuku jumps onto the wall and bounces off of it, leaping at the guard like a feral cat. No, like a rabbit with rabies.

He tries to draw in a breath before his attack, only to feel nothing coming into his throat. In fact, air is suddenly being pulled *out* of his lungs, scratching against his insides painfully.

Oh. This man either has a breathtaking quirk—pun fully intended—or an air manipulation quirk. Either way, it’s gotta end fast, or Izuku’s not gonna be able to finish this quickly, if at all.

The boy falters midair, twisting away from the bullet aimed at his head, and kicks the guard with so much force that they’re both sent crashing through the doors.

Huh. That works.

There’s screaming, and it’s only when he sees the large group of teens and young adults around him that he realizes how bad this must look.

He scrambles to his feet and makes himself small, hands lifting placatingly.

“Hey, hey! I’m here to help, it’s okay! I’m going to—”

A hand grabs his leg, and Izuku casually kicks the guard beneath him sharply, hoping no one saw it in the faint light.

There’s thundering footsteps down the hallway, and Izuku’s eye twitches in frustration. “You guys stay here for a little longer, I have to deal with those assholes out there, okay? Just a sec!”

He doesn’t wait for a reply before backing out of the darkness and throwing himself into the fray.

This is not good. His time is up. It’s probably been ten minutes by now, and they most likely know he’s here. The alarm will sound any second—ah, there it is. Right on time.

The dusty walls are painted in red lighting as the alarms sound off, and Izuku feels his hope start to diminish. *Come on, Tsukauchi. I’d*

prefer it if the backup came today.

A hit to the face has him crashing into another guard, who immediately covers the boy's face in what looks like plastic.

And okay. That's a pretty funny quirk—having plastic wrap come out of your wrist like some sort of discount Spider-Man. Funny, but also deadly.

Izuku struggles against the tight hold on him, gasping when the man holding him from behind presses himself against the wall with a harsh thud. Slowly, he begins to suffocate.

"Give it up." The English sounds rough in Izuku's ear. *"Just let us do this to you. It'll be painless if you stop struggling—"*

Wow. Izuku knows these people are pedophiles, but damn.

With a renewed vigor, he kicks the chin of the guy advancing before him and throws his head back against the one smothering him. The crack of bone fills the air, only partially drowned out by the alarms and the approaching sirens, and Izuku quickly rips the plastic off of him. He turns on them, grin sharp behind his mask.

He wishes they could see it.

He picks up his discarded tranq gun and gets back to shooting. He drops half of them before he runs out of darts, and he backs up into a corner to get a bird's eye view of the few guards left.

A pink sludge bomb does the trick. It's his last one, so Izuku will have to be careful now.

After finding another gun and making sure the criminals who are now stuck in the goo are unconscious, he calls out to the scared teens, panting now.

They come out slowly and in one large group, which would've been more heartwarming to see if they weren't currently in the given situation.

He holds out his hands again so as not to scare them and tells them the plan. They have to be quiet, and they have to listen to him. He mentally mapped out all of the hallways and rooms he passed on the way here, so going back to the exit will prove easy.

He just has to get them there.

Izuku leads them like a pack of wolves, darting ahead around ten yards at a time to deal with the incoming flock of fighters. Not too many guards stand in their way, though, not after seeing how bloodthirsty the group looks.

And if the boy sees some of the other kids kicking and spitting on the unconscious guards as they pass, he doesn't mention it.

They have a right to be angry. He can give them this.

It takes mere minutes to get to the fateful door leading to the outside, and Izuku ushers them out two at a time, directing them to the approaching sirens and police cars skidding to a halt out front.

Izuku is constantly keeping a close eye on his surroundings, so he's ready for it when four more hitmen appear out of a side hallway, guns blazing.

They don't shoot him, obviously not willing to risk shooting their prized possessions, but they do aim a few shots at the ceiling.

Which causes three of the kids near the back to start running *away* from the exit.

Izuku, who is just finishing up taking down the guards, watches them go with a muted huff. "Oh, come on."

He goes after them once he's ordered the rest of the children to keep going towards the heroes. He's certain they'll be well cared for there.

And Izuku doesn't know what is it with stairs and people thinking that that's where they should run during a raid, but the kids are heading up the floors, and the gremlins are *fast.*

Izuku is tired. He can barely keep up. It's only the sinking feeling in his gut that tells him *something bad is going to happen* that spurs him forward.

They're already on the top floor heading for the rooms on the far side of the building when he reaches them.

"Hey, wait a second! We've got to get you three out!" They face him, terrified, and Izuku makes sure he sounds as soft as possible as he continues, putting a hand on one of the little boys' head. "Trust me,

it's much safer back down there. You don't want to go this way!"

A girl, looking the oldest of the three, takes charge. She can't be any older than Izuku himself. "Are the—are the heroes here?"

Izuku nods, and he would've responded verbally had he not just heard the heavy footsteps coming from the side. The boy instantly shoves the group behind him, facing the very *large* figure in front of him.

He looks just short of four hundred pounds, and he wears a crisp suit with a fully shaved head. The suit is much nicer than the ones some of the guards were wearing. He must be the boss. Or one of them.

"It's you," he says, as if equal parts amused and irritated. The Japanese is smooth, meaning he's obviously been here in Japan for a while. "I knew you'd have something to do with this, Bunny."

Bunny. Normally, Izuku would just be offended that his vigilante name was messed up, but the way the man said it just sent shivers down his spine. His heart beats fast.

"If anyone calls me that one more time, I'm gonna go back to juvie on another cannibalism charge," he breathes out.

The Big Bad Guy chortles. "You're funny, kid. You know, I've been waiting to meet you."

Izuku feels the kids behind him trembling. He has to get them out safely before he finishes this up. "Sure, well, give me a second here, and I'll gladly get acquainted with you, aight?"

Another low chuckle, and Izuku ignores the slight fear that coils up in his stomach. He points to the stairs, giving the older girl a meaningful look.

"Just get down those stairs, and you'll be fine." He hands her his tranq gun, pushing her and the two boys back. "Use that if you need to. It's not lethal! Go on now."

She thankfully doesn't argue, and she quickly leads the kids away, fumbling a bit with the gun.

Izuku lets out a breath, his eyes lighting up. He faces the Big Bad Guy and is suddenly met with a bunch of knives hovering around the man like wings.

That's his quirk, really? Blades?

The man winks at him. "I'm going to enjoy this, kiddo."

Great. I have a feeling that I won't.

Shouta doesn't really mind vigilantes, in all honesty.

He sees why they do what they do, even when they push boundaries and break laws. As long as they're working for the right side and have a pretty good head on their shoulders, Shouta doesn't see the harm in letting them do their thing.

Most of the vigilantes Shouta have met in the past use similar unorthodox methods to capture and restrain villains. Those vigilantes are brutal, efficient, and quick-witted.

Rabbit is no different. Except for the fact that he's most definitely on the younger side. And also that he's a little more, well, *explosive.*

Both in personality and actuality. He actually reminds him of another vigilante he knew a few years back.

The man has to admit he's never been a fan of how the Hero Commission tries to keep everything tightly controlled. They send out heroes like Endeavor for the slightest reasons, at least when they realize they can't get what they want when they want it.

It's probably worse for a hero who isn't underground. Someone like All Might.

While the number one hero can obviously get away with a lot more stuff than regular pros can, he's also a lot more limited. Being in the public eye has its advantages, but the popularity also brings with it a ton of restraints.

All Might can't, for example, bash a group of newer heroes for not saving a young boy from a villain made of sludge. It would be considered rather distasteful, and kind of unprofessional.

While for Shouta himself, being the underground hero he is, can say pretty much whatever he damn well pleases, as long as it's not directly

denouncing the Commission. It's not like he'd give a rat's ass about the backlash he'd receive anyway.

But back to the point. Hero laws can drastically limit heroes, so of course vigilantes have no such constraints.

It's similar to how laws and systems in general only apply to those willing to *abide* by them. Those who aren't willing are simply going to turn into criminals and villains. Thus making vigilantes, by definition, criminals. Which is why Shouta only complained a little bit when he was put on Rabbit's case.

He's a hero, and it's his job to take down criminals and protect the peace. But Shouta can also see where the detective is coming from. To be spotted this many times in only a week or so and be connected to *so many fucking cases—*

It's only natural the Commission wants him out of the picture. Or maybe *in* the picture. They want him alive, or else they'd have sent Endeavor already despite Tsukauchi's promises. They probably want him for themselves.

The vigilante has a higher success rate than most of the top heroes today and has the skills to match even the dirtiest of villains. So the Commission getting their hands on him would be the equivalent to finding a piece of chocolate in a shop full of nothing but licorice, with the licorice being the agents that do the Commission's dirty work.

Why go for the shitty stuff when you can have something better? Something near perfect. Someone who is fresh and almost always successful in their work. Shouta—and any other sane person—would take the chocolate.

Okay, maybe not the best analogy, but it works.

Rabbit would become the perfect weapon for them, much like the number three hero is—which is a dangerous topic in itself, but that's a discussion for another time.

The brat is definitely not sloppy with his stuff. Shouta assumed that the vigilante would mess up a little bit more, considering how new he is to all of this. Sure, his files claim that he's been doing this for a few years now, only having gained popularity more recently, but Shouta still considers him pretty fresh.

If you don't count the past two incidents, Rabbit is like a ghost. The

criminals he takes down always say that they didn't even seen him coming. They couldn't get a good look at his face, or even at his quirk.

All they say is he's apparently short, snarky, and fast. *Incredibly* fast.

Which backs up the theory that he has an enhancement quirk. That would explain how he's seemed to evade heroes well enough up to this point. Even Shouta himself has a little trouble keeping up with him.

Strong, fast, and obviously intelligent, Shouta sort of respects Rabbit's drive. At least until he opens his mouth.

The expletives that come out of him sometimes are enough to make even Shouta wince. It's even more obvious that he's young.

Shouta doesn't know how to feel about that. He's never really had any strong opinions on teenagers or kids in general. He teaches them, sure, but he's also expelled so, so many of them in just the past couple years alone.

And while it looks like he doesn't care, he can't bear to see his students not take their lives seriously by doing dumb, crazy stunts. It's costly—a word Rabbit probably doesn't even have in his mental dictionary.

He doesn't want the kid to end up dead in a ditch somewhere due to his own recklessness, a feeling that the detective shares with him.

"I'm gonna kill him. I'm actually gonna kill him. The little shit is making me go insane."

Shouta takes a long sip of his coffee before replying to the detective. "I don't see what's so bad about this. He called those pros out, as he should've."

"You don't see what's so bad?" Tsukauchi throws him a glare, though there's no real heat behind it. "That video is trending over four different social media platforms, Aizawa! Not just in Japan! Do you know how bad this makes everyone look? The board is pissed."

"Why, because he's right?"

The detective huffs. "You're insufferable sometimes. And don't act like you're all innocent. This is kind of your fault, you know. You were

supposed to go talk to him."

It's annoying to be called out.

That was a few hours earlier, when Shouta dropped by the station yet again after seeing the news. His friend was in the middle of an exasperated breakdown—faded coffee stains on his button-up shirt and slacks, papers and documents discarded all around him.

Shouta knows he was debating whether or not to track the vigilante down himself and smack some sense into him.

Hell, *Shouta* is still debating whether or not to go lecture the kid. While being proud of Rabbit for spewing the truth to those heroes, the man can also realize how bad of a decision that will prove to be later. He just pissed off the Hero Commission even more, along with all the less sensical pros.

And he's also probably won the favor of some villains.

Rabbit has undeniably done himself a disservice. While he's got the support of a lot of the general public now, especially after saving that blond boy, he's also made a lot of enemies.

His phone suddenly rings, breaking him from his thoughts, and Shouta skids to a stop on the rooftop he's running on. Well, speak of the devil and he shall appear.

"I was at the station not even three hours ago, Tsukauchi, what is it? You know I'm on patrol."

The man answers with a hurried tone, and Shouta instantly goes rigid. *"Rabbit just texted me an address. He's busting a trafficking ring, are you available as backup?"*

"Where? What's the situation looking like?"

"I sent my closest officers. They have most of the kids, I think, but they're still hearing shots in the building. I'll forward you the text."

He hangs up abruptly, and not a moment later the man hears a ding on his phone. And then Shouta is sprinting.

He's only five miles away, so he can get there quickly if he pushes it. He glances at the text again, frowning at the number written after the address. *Thirty.*

Thirty what? Guards? Minutes? Victims?

Victims. It sounds like the best guess. Which means he needs to make sure the police and other heroes know the count so they can tell if they're missing anyone.

The sounds of gunshots get closer. A couple heroes are already spread out throughout the neighborhood, evacuating them because of their proximity to the raid. Shouta uses his capture weapon to spring himself forward even faster, and he approaches the police officers camped out front. Quite a few ambulances are parked on the side, tending to what looks like the victims.

The *children,* Shouta thinks, upset. *Some even younger than my past students.*

"There's supposed to be around thirty of them," he announces, garnering their attention. "How many have you counted?"

The hero closest to him straightens up. "Twenty-seven, Eraserhead. We haven't checked the upper floor yet, so there might be a few more there."

"I'll check, but in the meantime, get some water heroes on the scene! We'll need strong firefighters in a minute."

Shouta ignores the confused look the hero gives him. He has a feeling fire is going to get involved simply because of Rabbit's presence.

The first thing he notices when he goes in is the bodies on the ground. A few paramedics rush past Shouta to check the unconscious criminals. None of them look dead, so that's a plus.

There are gunshots high above, however, faint due to the distance, and Shouta narrows his eyes to try to adjust to the darkness. The alarms are still going, and it's making his dry eye worse.

Giving a nod to the paramedics, he heads for the stairs on the far side of the room. The building is big for a warehouse, and Shouta has to take large steps so as not to trip on the criminals lying on the ground.

Now that he's looking, Shouta can see the darts stuck to their skin. Tranqs.

That explains a lot.

He takes the steps two at a time, only to run into a small group of kids halfway up, having just rounded a sharp corner. They immediately stumble back with fearful eyes, and a girl steps forward, ushering the two boys behind her.

They must've been trying to go down, and Shouta got in the way.

The group seems unhurt, though a little shaken up, and the older girl holds up a gun with trembling hands.

Shouta instantly puts up his arms, still on the steps. "I'm a pro hero," he explains, looking her in the eye to make sure she listens. "I'm not here to hurt you. I just need to know, is there anyone else up there?"

The girl hesitantly nods. "Only the, uh, the hero, and the—the boss is up there."

Hero?

Shouta nods in acknowledgement. "You three follow me, and be careful." He reaches for the gun with wide movements, carefully taking it away from the girl before casting it to the side. "Are any of you—?"

An explosion suddenly rocks the building, and Shouta instinctively pulls the three kids to him and jumps over the side of the stairs just as fire engulfs the entire top level. He uses his capture weapon to make sure the kids are secure against him before booking it to the exit, the sudden heat acting as encouragement.

Yep. Rabbit is definitely here.

They had twenty-seven out there. These must be the last three.

He has full intention of helping Rabbit after depositing the kids to the police and paramedics. The girl gives him a shaky thank you, and he just gives her a curt nod before turning back to the fiery building.

There doesn't seem to be any criminals left on the bottom floor, so it's uphill from here. The heroes are almost finished with dragging the guards out so they won't get burned. He stops to ask if they need help, and after being waved off, he heads back to the top.

Gunshots ring out again, this time closer to him. Heat washes over him, and shouted voices reach his ear. He races up the long, metal stairs, and sees a few bodies being dropped from the railings on the

uppermost floor.

There are no heroes or police this high up, so it must be Rabbit. It seems like the vigilante is doing good without him. But he still has to help. He has to see it for himself.

This event might help solve Shouta's current troubles of having to actually catch the vigilante in question.

The files Tsukauchi handed him didn't really shed any light on what kind of person he's dealing with, which is why he took it upon himself to look up everything he could about the teenager. Even going as far to try and note his frequent patrol routes and the time he takes to go through them.

He seems like a good person, generally speaking. But for all Shouta knows, Rabbit could be completely different behind his mask.

He's never even heard the vigilante speak except for in recordings, and even then it's highly possible the kid's using a homemade voice changer. They know nothing beyond how he usually acts due to how well his actual identity is hidden.

He's barely even seen the guy apart from a few interactions here and there when Shouta had been trying to tail him but ended up being far too slow to capture him.

According to the evidence, Rabbit is a happy, rebellious vigilante who's not afraid to speak his mind and do what he thinks is right. He's also incredibly intelligent and skillful.

So yeah, there's a chance Shouta might be in over his head.

But all of those thoughts come to a halt when he catches sight of a dark green figure, illuminated by the flames behind him, heading for the window after seemingly catching his breath. Bingo.

You wanted me to talk to the kid, Tsukauchi, so that's what I'm going to do.

Izuku didn't mean to get shot. Honestly.

But the Big Bad Guy set off an explosion right before their scuffle started and, being the greedy bastard he is, took all of his attention during their fight. Izuku made himself vulnerable, then, as he assumed the boss was the only one left.

He didn't notice the guard to the side until it was too late.

Izuku saw it, though. He saw the flash of light reflecting off the gun's barrel, but it was still a little dark. He assumed it to be a tranq gun.

With his enhanced metabolism, he was confident that a tranq dart wouldn't work on him. And besides, he didn't want to risk anyone else getting shot by it.

So, Izuku didn't dodge. He instead parried another hit from the Big Bad Guy and took the *'dart'* in his abdomen. He had not, of all things, expected the wave of pain that rocked through him upon the bullet's impact, or for the bullet itself to be a hollow point.

Yeah. Definitely not a tranq gun.

It was a hollow point bullet, meaning he now has several small pieces of metal inside him, and not in the fun way.

"What the shit."

Izuku *yanks* the gun away from his side opponent, darting forward to kick the man's legs out from under him before throwing him over the ledge of the top floor. Let the heroes have him.

They're like sharks anyways. Bloodthirsty motherfuckers.

Another knife flies towards him, and Izuku blocks it with one of his own, grabbing the discarded blade before throwing both of them at the Big Bad Guy.

He ducks down at the nick of time, but it gives Izuku the distraction he hoped for. He sails forward, foot outstretched, only for his ankle to be caught and his body thrown to the ground.

His breath leaves him all at once, and then the Big Bad Guy is towering over him, another knife being drawn out of thin air with his quirk.

Izuku jerks to the side, dodging the blade as it drives itself into the wood beneath him like it's nothing but wet paper. *That could've been*

my head.

He pushes off on his palms and hikes his legs up to wrap around the man's throat, trying to rapidly draw in all the air he can before making his move.

"This is where you're supposed to moan," Izuku chokes out, lurching forward and driving his fist into the man's temple.

The Big Bad Guy sways, and Izuku doesn't wait to see if he's still conscious before unclenching his legs and rolling away, watching as the man faceplants into the floor.

Is he out? Izuku hopes so.

Oh, fuck yeah. I'm amazing. I'm a fucking god.

He turns away, already eyeing the broken window. He's gotta go. There are a bunch of heroes here. They'll take care of everything else. He barely has any energy left to use—he's gotta save it for escaping. And the bullet in his abdomen would very much like to be treated, thank you, and soon.

But then there's an angry roar behind him, which foils his plans.

Izuku moves, but evidently not fast enough as he's body-slammed to the ground, being thrown straight into the flames. It appears the Big Bad Guy wasn't as unconscious as he thought.

"I'll *kill you, Rabbit!"*

He tries to jump out of the fire, not wanting to get fried like a chicken wing, but the man seems dead set on wrestling him in the flames, and he tries to tackle him again.

Izuku is ready this time around, and he meets him head on with a shattering kick to the stomach, sending the criminal stumbling to the side. He grabs his shoulder with one hand and his head with the other, using the very last bit of his strength to twist the man around and slam him into the wall.

The crackling of flames drowns out the guy's yells, and Izuku sees a knife appear shakily beside him. The boy just slams the guy into the wall even harder, again and again, not stopping until the mental hold on the blade is released and it clatters to the ground.

Now he *must* be unconscious for real now.

Izuku steps back, letting the Big Bad Guy slump to the floor in a bloodied heap with a loud thump. *A little messier than I intended, but it's his fault. His quirk is hella strong.*

Heat suddenly licks up Izuku's pant legs, and the boy only then remembers that fire is fucking *hot.*

Grabbing the criminal by the back of his vest, the boy drags him away from the flames using Boost before heaving him over the railings, dropping him to the base level like he's an anchor to a ship.

There's shouts from below, and it sounds like the pro heroes are giving instructions and body counts. No one's been recovered dead, apparently.

Which is a win in Izuku's book.

Something moves out of the corner of his vision, and the boy turns to get a glimpse of red eyes staring straight at him, almost gleaming in the firelight. It sends shivers down Izuku's spine, because he suddenly *knows.*

It's him. The guy who's been following him for the past few weeks. He can feel the prickling sensation start up at the back of his neck, and Izuku is certain that he's right.

Which reminds him. He should probably be escaping right about now.

Izuku turns tail and runs. He stifles his cry of pain when he corkscrews out of the window, opening his arms up wide as he comes out into open air.

Oh right. They're a few miles away from the city, so there's nothing but houses here. He has nothing to land on but trees.

He crashes through the leaves, covering his face with his arms as branches scrape and claw at him like thorns. He hits the ground none-too-gently and scrambles to his feet, pressing a hand against his abdomen as more blood leaks from his gunshot wound.

A glance behind him shows that yes, he is being followed. A figure is jumping through the trees after him with all the grace of a cat, and it's clear even from this far away that he's definitely gaining on him.

“Oh fuck, oh shit, oh—”

He stumbles over a root but keeps going, not wanting to give up yet. His strength is waning, that’s for sure. He stupidly used up all of his energy because of his enhancements and not left any over for his getaway, which was his original plan.

The trees start to thin out, and Izuku feels a bit of hope bloom inside his chest when he sees a clearing up ahead. Houses line the streets, so Izuku must’ve finally reached a neighborhood.

Izuku is under a street lamp, exiting the dense line of trees and making for his freedom, when a shadow falls over him. He puts on the brakes so hard that he ends up tripping over his own feet, and the next thing he knows he’s plummeting toward the ground, face first.

Oh, he loves the taste of dirt in his mouth.

There’s a thud from somewhere in front of him, and he opens his eyes to see black boots standing just a few inches away from his face. Izuku is glad that his intuition was right, as he *does* in fact know who this is.

“Rabbit,” the man above him greets. The bastard doesn’t even sound out of breath.

“Eraserhead.”

A pause, and then a hum in consideration: “You’re smaller than you look.”

Izuku snorts, lifting his chin off the ground to meet his gaze. “And you’re even more annoying than you sound. Look, if you’re gonna capture me, just do it already. Make it a quickie.”

Eraserhead doesn’t blink an eye at the interesting word choice. “I’m not going to capture you.”

“Huh. Interesting.” Izuku narrows his eyes once he gets a good look at him. “On an unrelated note, are you perhaps into bondage? The scarf gives it away, you can’t really deny it.”

Eraserhead makes a low noise, something between a huff and a grunt. “You use sarcasm to distance people.”

“And yet you’re still here, so could you kindly fuck off? I’m kind of in

the middle of something."

"What, staring at the dirt beneath you?"

The reply comes quick, and it has Izuku pushing himself up by the elbows and leaning back against a nearby tree, casually covering his bullet wound with a hand. His hoodie should be dark enough to hide the growing blood stain. Except this conversation is going to be hard, because thick, warm liquid is currently trailing down Izuku's side and dripping onto the floor beneath him.

He prays the man won't notice. It's pretty dark out, so the chances are low.

He can't show any weakness lest Eraserhead decides to attack him for being an easy target.

Izuku glares half-heartedly at him. "What do you want from me, if you're not planning on arresting me?"

"To give you a choice." The man's gaze is piercing, letting Izuku know of the sudden seriousness behind his words. "I know you're young, and I know you've got heart, kid. So I'm letting you have a chance here."

Letting. As if he has control over him. Maybe he does, and Izuku just doesn't know it.

Izuku grits his teeth. "Go on."

"You did good back there, at the warehouse. You took those mercenaries down as efficiently and effectively as possible, while also prioritizing the victims' safety. Not very many pros do that, as you pointed out a few nights ago. You have a lot of skill and potential. Unfortunately, not all people agree. And, luckily for you, you managed to piss off nearly every single one."

I'm stuck between feeling giddy over your praise and being offended over that last part.

Izuku rolls his eyes. "I know they're jealous of me. What are you getting at?"

"You can turn yourself in. And before you argue, hear me out. This'll give you a few advantages in court, and you'll get off easier and with less charges than you would have any other way." He tilts his head,

but not in a curious way, more of in an *I'm going to figure you out* sort of way. "You'll be given some time to tie up any loose ends as Rabbit, and then you'll hang up the costume for good. You're still a kid, so giving up now while you've still got that as an excuse is in your best interest, trust me."

"I'm finding it hard to trust anyone right now, so that's a hard no."

"You trust Tsukauchi, and he trusts me." He looks slightly annoyed when he says this, and Izuku files that detail away for later. "If you don't believe what I'm saying now, believe him. You have his phone number, right? Ask him yourself."

Izuku swipes a hand over his sweaty face, fatigue beginning to take over. "I only read half of what he sends me. I don't speak his language."

The boy relishes in the brief look of utter confusion on Eraserhead's face, only for it to be replaced by irritation. "My advice to you is to turn yourself in. You do a lot of good, but you can't deny that you get in the way of others. But. We can work things out for you in the long run, legally speaking. It'll be easier for you and for everyone else."

"I don't think it's that easy."

"You don't seem to have any better plans."

Izuku balks at being called out. "Harassing me when I haven't even done anything is a misdemeanor crime, punishable with a fine and up to two days in jail. You should be ashamed, sir. I have literally done nothing wrong, ever, in my entire life."

The underground hero ignores him, getting right back to business. "One week. You have one week to make a decision."

"Or what?" Damn him, Izuku is curious. "What are you going to do if I decide not to turn myself over?"

"I won't be the one doing anything. The Public Safety Commission will. Believe me, you'll wish you listened to me the first time. Consider this a warning."

Okay. That's fucking ominous. And kind of infuriating, since it's not really an answer to his question.

Eraserhead is walking away, hands in his pockets, heading back

towards the warehouse. “Don’t screw yourself over, kid. I know you’re smart, so don’t disappoint me. We can help you get out of this.”

The boy frowns at the tired tone, at the kind of sad way the man says it. He doesn’t know what it means. He doesn’t know what any of this means.

His mouth opens before he can stop it. “Hey, you think I can get an autograph!”

But the hero is already gone, disappearing into the forest, and Izuku sighs to himself. The bastard probably wouldn’t have given him one anyway, being underground and all that.

Tilting his head up, he glances at the stars above one last time and forces himself up. He can’t wait around when it comes to dealing with a gunshot wound. He does *not* want to bleed out the night before he has to go to the mall with Kacchan, thank you very much. Infections aren’t very festive to have, either.

His head is reeling. He’s happy that the mission was successful so he can collect his money when he gets the chance at the club, but he’s also very much wounded, and now he has to worry about what Eraserhead said to him.

His ultimatum.

Izuku doesn’t know what to think at the moment. He doesn’t know if he even *can* think with the bullet lodged in his abdomen.

The worst part, though, is that Izuku can’t tell if the underground hero was lying when he said he’d help him.

Chapter End Notes

i

time will tell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Kacchan, this one looks new!”

“It’s not. It came out last year.”

“Bullshit. How come I haven’t seen it then?”

“Because you’re too busy getting shot every damn day of the week to pay attention to the newest hero merch coming out.”

Izuku gives his friend an irritated look, mildly annoyed. “So you *are* mad at me.”

“I’m not,” Kacchan snaps in a rather mad way, shoving his hands into his pockets and heading towards the shirt Izuku pointed to.

This makes Izuku sigh.

“Kacchan, I’m fine. And it’s not like I *wanted* to get shot. It just kinda *happened,* you know?”

“Can’t leave you alone for a goddamn second without you almost dying.” He drags Izuku into the store by the front of his hoodie. “I don’t even know how you’re still alive after all the dumb shit you pull.”

“Death is tired of me. She threatened to file a restraining order if I showed up on her doorstep one more time—”

Kacchan raises a hand to hit him, and Izuku dodges it easily with a bright smile.

They’re on the top level of the largest mall in Musutafu, browsing through the stores and buying little things here and there. The mall is pretty active during this time of day. The crowds are huge, and Izuku is sure that business must be booming since summer is almost near. The breeze is just chilly enough to give people an excuse to wear long pants and sleeves.

Izuku himself is wearing one of Kacchan’s hoodies. He showed up to

his friend's house wearing jeans and a ripped black shirt with the words *i'm dead (but actually)* printed on it in flowery font. A shittily drawn human skeleton with neon sparkly crossbones coming out of its eyes was the centerpiece to it all, and Izuku is still pretty proud of it. It only cost him a couple dollars at the thrift shop down the street to his building.

Kacchan, however, did not share his friend's sentiment on the masterpiece, as the second he opened the door, ready to leave for the mall, the light seemed to leave his eyes. He made Izuku cover it up, claiming that he wouldn't be caught *dead* with someone wearing such a disgusting shirt. Which is also unfair, in Izuku's opinion, as Kacchan owns skull shirts himself. It's likely Kacchan just wants to be the only weird kid out of the two of them.

So here they are. Izuku is still pouting, even though Kacchan's red hoodie compliments his jeans and is actually really soft.

Yeah, he is definitely not getting it back.

Kacchan grunts, gesturing with a hand at the shirt Izuku pointed at. "See, I fucking told you. Came out a few months ago."

He's right. The tag has the original date on it.

"Whatever. It still looks nice." Izuku peers closer at it, deciding that he likes the Ingenium logo on the front. A little outdated since the hero came out with a new one recently, but at least it's on major sale. Izuku thinks he might get it.

He's only got a few bills left, so he can't get a lot, but he's going to cash in his checks from his recent gigs later on in the day, so it won't be a problem. After all, he isn't sporting a bullet wound on his abdomen for nothing.

He helped those kids get outta that hellhole, so the money doesn't really matter; it's just an added bonus at this point.

"You already have two Ingenium shirts," Kacchan complains. "Pick something else, or I swear I'll leave your stupid ass here."

Izuku rolls his eyes. "I'm surprised you remember those shirts. I got those years ago."

"My memory's better than yours, shitty nerd. Name one thing I've ever forgotten."

“You forgot me in the parking lot last month when we snuck into that amusement park.”

Kacchan’s face contorts into a smug grin. “I did that on purpose.”

It’s Izuku’s turn to hit him.

The rest of their time at the mall passes by in a blur. They banter back and forth a little more than usual, as Kacchan is still upset at him for some reason. At one point, the blond tries to fight a lady for running into them and not apologizing.

Izuku is forced to hold him back, having to ignore the voices in his head that were cheering the boy on.

Both teens have a couple bags in their hands now, full of clothing and smaller accessories, and they decide to rest on a bench near the middle of the mall on the first floor. The open air is a blessing, and they both start to relax for at least a few seconds.

Kacchan is on his phone, scrolling through the news and some hero blog post, while Izuku is looking around, notebook in hand.

This is a perfect opportunity for some people watching.

He’s always been observant. Hell, there were quite a few times back then where Kacchan would call him a stalker just to get under his skin. He kind of is, honestly. The only difference being that he doesn’t actually follow people around unless he has a reason to. Probable cause and all that.

He just sits back and observes most days.

There’s a fountain.

Izuku blinks at the sudden thought, not knowing where it came from. *Okay, and?*

Jump in it.

What the fuck? Izuku frowns, unsure what the new deep voice at the back of his mind is doing. Why would he do that? He’s still healing. His bandaged torso hurts like hell, so why would he make it worse?

Why not?

Oh, shit. The voice is right.

In a moment of incredibly poor judgement, Izuku slips the hoodie off of his back, revealing the monstrosity of a shirt underneath. He takes off his shoes as well, not wanting to ruin them.

Kacchan glares at him over his phone. “What the fuck are you doing? I already said I’m not sitting next to you when you look like that.”

“I’m jumping in the fountain.”

The boy stares, mouth slightly agape in disgust. He looks disappointed, but not surprised. “You dug a bullet out of your stomach not twelve fucking hours ago. What makes you think that’s a good idea?”

Izuku shrugs and continues stretching.

“You did a shitty job at stitching yourself up, too. How did you even get all the pieces out?”

Izuku blanches and rubs at his neck nervously, laughing lightly. “Well.”

Kacchan turns on him, eyes intense. “You did, didn’t you?”

“Of course I did! And it doesn’t matter now. I’m jumping in the fountain, and that’s that. I’m already in motion, so I can’t stop now. Like an electron in an atom.”

So what if he’s deflecting? He does *not* want to remember last night. It turns out that if you poor enough liquor onto an open wound, you’ll eventually become numb all over. So yeah, he had a *lot* of fun.

“Deku, I swear—”

Izuku sets his own phone into one of his discarded bags on the bench before jumping up. He has a clear path to the fountain, so this is gonna be amazing.

He takes a few big steps and leaps, foot touching the edge of the wall holding the water, and promptly does a belly flop.

The reaction is instantaneous. There are gasps and laughter coming from all around him, and the water splashes up like a wave. Izuku sloshes around in the surprisingly clean water for a few more seconds, giddy, right up until he hears shouted voices. Fuck. *Mall cops.*

The green-haired boy stumbles to his feet and goes back the way he

came. A crowd has gathered now, drawn to the noise, and they part for him immediately once he lands on the tiled floor and slips.

And, okay. That hurts like a fucking *bitch.*

More laughs reach his ears, and Izuku finds himself giggling along with them. He speeds past the bench, grabbing his shoes and bags as he goes.

“Run, Kacchan, go!” He slips again, only to regain his balance before he can truly fall. *“Sled gang, sled gang!* Come on, say it!”

Kacchan catches up to him fairly quickly. “I’m not repeating that shit!” He yells, smacking the back of his friend’s head.

“Hey, boys, come back here!”

The two of them only run faster. Izuku throws his head back to glare at the cops giving chase, water falling from his hair. “No! *Fuck you,* old man!”

And that’s when Izuku realizes he’s probably been spending too much time around Kacchan lately. Now he’s starting to sound like him.

They run into a small restaurant at the other end of the mall, confident that they’ve shaken the cops from their tail. Kacchan still makes him put back on the hoodie, though, and not just to look different to the cops.

“I’m gonna kill you,” Kacchan promises, sitting across from him at the table. “I take it back. You deserved that bullet.”

“And they say friendship is dead.”

Kacchan’s eye twitches. “That’s not how that phrase goes.”

“Yeah, but it still managed to piss you off, so—”

Kacchan reaches across the table, death in his eyes, but then the waitress approaches their table. She has a bright smile on her face, and without her presence, Izuku would’ve most definitely been strangled. Izuku owes her his life.

“Welcome in,” she says. “What can I get for you boys today?”

Kacchan sits back as if nothing happened, going back to his usual gruff self. “I’ll have the number four meal with a coke, please.”

Interestingly enough, Kacchan can be nice when he wants to be.

“Alright, and for you, dear?” She asks, addressing Izuku.

Izuku, having only been to a couple restaurants in his life and nowhere else, short-circuits. What do they even serve here?

“I’ll take the number four, too, please!”

Kacchan gives him an annoyed look but otherwise says nothing. The waitress walks away, and it’s only then that Izuku realizes something. His face turns red, and he squeezes his knees nervously through his jeans.

“Uh, Kacchan, I don’t think I have enough money for—”

“Did I ask you if you had enough money? No.”

Izuku frowns. “That’s not fair. You always pay for my food.”

“You embarrassed the fuck out of me by jumping into that fountain, so you’re letting me do this as repayment.”

Izuku snaps his mouth shut, still glowering once the waitress brings them their drinks. A lot of people won’t know this, but Kacchan is actually a huge sweetheart. A bitchy and controlling sweetheart, but a sweetheart nonetheless.

It doesn’t stop Izuku from feeling guilty, though. While the Bakugou family isn’t exactly uber rich, they’re definitely not poor either.

Though to be fair, pretty much everyone and anyone is richer than Izuku these days.

The water from the fountain is slowly drying, and Izuku shifts uncomfortably at the feeling. His wound hurts like a motherfucker now, and even though his bandages are waterproof, it still feels a little damp.

Maybe it’s blood. Oh, shit. Izuku hopes he hasn’t torn his stitches.

One quick peek shows that he does not in fact have a leaking bullet hole, as his bandages are still pristine white. He breathes out, leaning back in his chair.

Kacchan must’ve been watching him, as his eyes narrow onto his. “Does it hurt?”

“Only a little bit. Liquor works wonders.” That last part is a joke, but his friend stares at him with an indecipherable expression, causing Izuku to shake his head. “I didn’t drink any, Kacchan. Well, not *too* much—”

He dodges the rolled up wrapper coming his way from Kacchan’s straw, giggling. Truth be told, he only had a little bit. Not a lot, really —only a couple of glasses since he doesn’t like the taste so much. He just wanted to see what it would do.

Nothing, it turns out. It did absolutely jack shit. He knows that one glass can’t get someone with his enhanced metabolism drunk, so he assumed that a few would be enough to do it. It turns out he was wrong.

It would take, according to Izuku’s calculations, eight glasses of straight liquor.

Regardless, the liquor didn’t help with any of the pain permanently. He’s still sore, and jumping into the fountain has done nothing but reignite the dull burn in his lower torso.

“You’re not going out at night until it’s healed, right?” Kacchan says once the waitress brings out their meals, barely sparing Izuku a glance as he digs in.

“‘Course not. I may be dumb, but I’m not stupid.”

Kacchan doesn’t grace him with a reply to that, so Izuku starts on his food.

It’s a pretty large portion. Cheap food tastes the best at places such as this one: cheap restaurants hidden away in the corners of malls. They usually have the best customer service, too.

With his metabolism, having larger servings is a blessing. Especially now since he used up most of his energy yesterday. Maybe a week to recuperate isn’t such a bad idea.

Kacchan eats slower than Izuku, as always. The teen likes to take some time and look at the food, mentally critiquing it and giving praise. Which is kind of ironic. Izuku analyzes people, and Kacchan analyzes food. It’s an interesting dynamic.

“That hobo ninja sounds like an ass.”

Izuku frowns, pulling away from his drink. “Who?”

“Hobo ninja,” Kacchan says impatiently, gesturing aggressively with his chopsticks. “Y’know, the guy named after the thing I bite off at the top of my pencils?”

“You mean Eraserhead?”

“That’s him. What a lame fucking name, anyway.”

“I don’t think he was being an asshole, Kacchan. He was just doing his job. Why do you think that?”

“Why wouldn’t I? From the texts you sent me about that talk with him, he seems like a pretentious ass.”

And doesn’t that sound familiar? Izuku finds a sudden burst of courage. “Like you?”

“Yeah.” Kacchan looks smug as he takes another bite of his food. “But at least you still follow me around. You probably don’t want nothing to do with him now.”

And isn’t that a dilemma. Izuku doesn’t *know* anymore. While the man was sort of a prick, he *was* just doing his job. He was probably forced onto the case against Rabbit anyway. He could’ve just taken Izuku in right then and there and not given him a chance to, as he put it, tie up any loose ends.

He was pretty generous, if Izuku is being honest.

A part of him wants to defend the hero, to put those thoughts into words, because despite his mixed feelings right now, he still likes Eraserhead. He’s still really cool and one of his favorite heroes. He wants to defend him, to chastise Kacchan about being so judgmental, but another part of him, the part that withers at not being in control and craves any excuse to commit a crime to save himself, is saying *fuck yeah, stick it to all of them!*

And he’s bound to listen to that part of himself.

Kacchan is scowling at him now. “Well? What are you gonna do to tell him your decision? Seek him out and tell him yourself? Because that would be a dumb idea.”

“Who said I made a choice already?” Kacchan just blinks at him, and

Izuku looks away sheepishly. “Alright, fine. What do you have in mind?”

The blond grins, and it’s all teeth. “I have spray paint.”

Izuku has never loved him more than he does in that moment.

Two hours later, they’re both running away from a poor officer in training who looks far too tired to be in the current situation.

He’s barely even trying, just weakly calling out to them as they sprint through the crowds, cans of spray paint still in hand. They’re covered in different colors, so they’re obviously suspicious, though no one tries to stop them as they escape.

“Sled gang, sled gang!”

Kacchan repeats it, too, only once, but it’s enough to make Izuku descend into a fit of laughter. He made sure to find a spot where there’d be no cameras to catch their faces as they sprayed the paint, and the gas masks on their faces should hopefully help more with their identities. They decided to wear them to protect against the fumes.

The cop must’ve stopped by now, as neither boy can hear yelling anymore. They slow to a stop, and Izuku tells himself he’s only panting because of his wound.

“I’m going back home,” Kacchan says, throwing a multicolored hand up in a rough dismissal. “Try not to get shot again, nerd. I expect you at the house on Thursday.”

That’s a given, but Izuku nods anyway, giving the boy the gas mask he borrowed. He pants out a goodbye and starts the walk to the edge of the city. He dropped his bags off at his building before they even started defacing the billboard, so he doesn’t have to carry anything there.

Pulling out his phone, he searches for his newest contact. He was a little hesitant about doing this at first, but after working through all of his nerves by spray painting with Kacchan, he’s not so uncertain anymore.

He sends a quick address to the man in question, just as he did to the detective the night before. He's trying to be as ominous as possible. He wants this guy to be freaked out.

Do you like the gift I made you? :)

Izuku likes to think that the non-suspicious emoticon makes it even better. He won't text anything else. He'll just have to wait for a response.

He's not very good at waiting, so he finds something else to do to pass the time.

The beach is quiet around this time of day, just before evening time. Everyone is busy either leaving work and heading home or doing last minute shopping to make dinner. To be fair, Dagobah Beach hasn't had many visitors lately, given the fact that it's covered in heaps of trash.

The beach was spotless once upon a time, like all things, until it started accumulating junk from the ocean over the course of a few years. Now nobody comes here.

Ms. Hanako told him all about it a year or so ago. She recalled the days when she'd go on dates with her partner there, back when the beach was still a popular tourist attraction.

And so, in honor of Ms. Hanako and her partner, Izuku has been slowly picking up stuff, just a few bits of trash here and there, whenever he passes by. It's not much, as he only stays for like ten minutes, but it's added up. He can put in the work if it means he can see it spotless one day, especially now that he's not going out as Rabbit for a little while.

He has more time today, which helps maintain his emotional state. Izuku doesn't just clean up Dagobah Beach—he does the same for other dirty areas of the district. Whenever he's not patrolling or working on his projects, he's doing that.

The sun is dipping low in the sky by the time he decides that he's done enough for today. He ended up working for a half hour longer than usual, so now a small portion of the beach has been cleared out—a few square yards by the edge, to be exact.

It's not much, but it makes Izuku just a little bit happier.

He turns around, longing for the comfort of his hard couch, and stops in his tracks.

The air feels weird. There's someone close by. He extends his senses and finds that someone is sitting on top of the hill near the pavilion, either near or on top of the steps. Their quirk is *strong,* he can feel it.

And it's familiar, too. Blaringly so.

Izuku peeks around the corner and up into the pavilion, eyes widening.

Is that *All Might?*

The hero is in his smaller form, but it's still undeniably him. He's sitting on one of the steps, looking down at his phone. It doesn't look like he's noticed Izuku just yet.

What is he doing? Izuku wonders. *Has he been there for—*

The man must sense his gaze, as he glances up abruptly, lips parting in surprise once he sees who's staring at him.

Izuku steps down, back out of sight, wincing. He begins to stride away fast, heart beating loudly.

No, no, no. Please walk away, please walk away.

The man immediately stands up and inflates into his bigger form, striding over with a huge grin on his face.

Izuku doesn't know how someone can stand to smile so much, and for that long, too. It's something he's always respected All Might for.

"Young man!" The hero exclaims, coming down the steps and stopping Izuku in his tracks. Izuku's shoulders hunch up, and he turns to face All Might with a wince. All Might towers over him and blocks out the rays of the sun. "I've been looking for you all over this city! I thought I'd have to lose hope! I never thought I'd find you here."

Yeah, never thought I'd find you here either.

Instead of saying this, though, Izuku rubs the back of his neck, wondering why the number one hero is taking an interest in him. It can't be because of Rabbit, or else he wouldn't be smiling like that.

Would he?

“Oh, yeah!” Izuku smiles awkwardly. “I actually just started coming here a few months ago. It’s crazy that no one visits here anymore.”

“I agree!” All Might’s eyes fall to Izuku’s hands, which are dirty from the grease and debris of the trash he picked up. “Er, were you touching the garbage piles?”

Izuku reddens. He really doesn’t want All Might to think he was acting like some trashy delinquent rooting through the garbage! “No, no! Uh —I mean, yes? Technically! I was trying to clean some of it up!”

“Ah, you’ve got a noble heart, I see!” He comes to stand right in front of him, and Izuku is reminded suddenly that All Might is just as tall as his Small Might form. It’s quite scary to think about, actually. “Well, I’m glad I found you! I’ve been meaning to talk with you.”

Izuku tries to calm himself. There’s no way he’s made the connection between him and Rabbit. That’s impossible. So then what? And why is Izuku freaking out so badly? All Might appears to be nothing but happy. He wouldn’t be acting like this if he was planning on tricking Izuku, right?

When Izuku tunes back in to his surroundings, All Might is suddenly back in his small form, a puff of smoke escaping him as his muscles deflate. Which scares the everliving *shit* out of Izuku.

It’s cool, but still unnatural.

The next moment feels like an important one, and the breeze coming off of the ocean sounds like a gentle whisper of victory.

All Might dips his head a fraction. “I wanted to tell you that I was wrong. It was foolish of me to say that your friend shouldn’t be a hero due to a quirk.”

And—*what the fuck?* Izuku can’t quite comprehend what’s just been said, because there’s no way that the Symbol of Peace is standing there and telling him that he made a mistake. And why is he doubling over—?

“I apologize, young man, for possibly discouraging your friend with what I said.” He drops his head even lower. “I ask that you please forgive me, and that you can find it in yourself to give me another chance.”

Izuku panics, *truly* panics, because honestly, what the *fuck* is going on.

And what does that last part even mean?

His hands jerk forward, only to stop before he can touch the behemoth of a man in front of him. “No, no, it’s fine, please! Don’t do that, it’s fine, I swear!”

All Might straightens up from his bow a little hesitantly, looking grim. Or maybe that’s just how his face looks when he’s in his small form, Izuku doesn’t know, but he keeps talking rapidly to fill the sudden silence.

“I didn’t even take what you said to heart, so there—there was no harm done! I mean, not that I didn’t care about your advice, but—but you’re still really cool and I still admire you—not in a weird way, though! I’m sure you didn’t mean it when you said it and I knew it when—”

“Woah, hey, hey!” All Might cuts him off with a wave of his hand. He chuckles awkwardly. “You’re a big fanboy, aren’t you?”

Izuku blushes, looking anywhere but at the man. He lied when he said he didn’t take the words All Might said to him to heart. There by that tunnel, they cut deep within Izuku, but now, upon hearing All Might’s apology and revisal, the boy can feel that shame start to leave him.

He coughs, crossing his arms in self-comfort. There’s just something about being in the presence of his idol, of his father’s arch-nemesis, that gets him extraordinarily nervous. “So, uh, what were you doing around this part of town?”

“Looking for you, of course.” He says it like it should be obvious, and Izuku sputters.

“But it’s been days since the sludge villain attacked me. Shouldn’t you have given up by now?”

All Might has the decency to look sheepish. “If I may be honest, I deeply regretted what I said to you. It was foolish of me, and I shouldn’t have ever said those things. I was set on finding you again if only to make sure you knew the real answer.”

Why did you care that much? I don’t think I’m worth that much effort for someone like you.

Izuku glances away again, staring at the piles of garbage surrounding them. “Oh,” he says quietly. “What changed your mind?”

All Might inflates back into his hero form with a blinding smile. “Well, young man, I had to get the sense knocked back into me! Later the very same day we first met, I was inspired after intercepting a short villain fight back in the city. A particular hero at the scene reminded me of why I chose this profession to begin with, and I realized that I had deviated from my roots, for lack of a better way to say it.”

Izuku’s eyes bug out of his skull. No *fucking* way. He can’t be talking about what Izuku thinks he’s talking about! What are the chances the fight he’s talking about was the second sludge fight with Kacchan?

With this comes another thought: did he just call Rabbit a *hero?*

Izuku shakes. “All Might—”

“Please, allow me to answer your question once more—correctly this time.” His hands come forward, settling on Izuku’s shoulders. The touch burns somehow, but Izuku was raised in the fire and now craves the warmth from it.

The earth has stopped spinning, only for them. Only for this. Izuku meets his gaze fully, eyes wide, skin prickling.

All Might is all tanned skin and scarred tissue, and his golden features light up the entire beach with more success than the goddamn sun setting behind them. “Your friend can without a doubt be a hero, and he shouldn’t doubt himself for a second. It doesn’t matter what his quirk is, or what he thinks he is limited by. None of that truly matters! It’s your actions that truly define who you are!” He tips his head, the setting sun framing his large build. “With enough training and determination, anyone can be a hero!”

For a while, the space between them is quiet. The waves are muted in Izuku’s mind. The birds flying overhead, the sand shifting beneath them—it does not exist. And the silence is painful. All Might’s words were painful. Why? They shouldn’t have been.

Izuku should be ecstatic. He should be feeling euphoric. Because this—this is what Izuku has wanted to hear ever since he was four fucking years old. Just those measly five words: *anyone can be a hero.* Because Izuku *is* anyone, so that means that he can be a hero, too, despite his background. Despite his nature, his father, his quirk. Despite his very real limitations

It’s what he’s always wanted to hear, but it’s been more of a pipe dream than anything. A selfish little thought that he’s kept at the back

of his mind. Sure, Kacchan has always told him that they'd be great heroes together. Hell, he's threatened to *force* Izuku into becoming a hero with him, but it's different when someone else says it.

Because Kacchan has known him his entire life; he could be biased. For All Might to say that he can be a hero even with a quirk like his own—it's almost enough to make Izuku *cry* even though he technically didn't say it for Izuku directly.

But why does it still hurt so much to hear? Why is it still so painful?

Izuku keeps walking through life one minute at a time, always forgetting to cauterize the wounds from his previous letdowns. He is a dog that licks the blood off his paws after each scratch, thinking he has cleansed himself when he has not. Perhaps this is why hearing All Might's words feels like salt on open wounds. This is why trusting again feels like deceit and betrayal and constantly being exhausted.

God, it fucking hurts, but the vines wound tight around his heart and lungs can only leave these kinds of puncture wounds from thorns once they have loosened, and Izuku feels that they must have. Air has never tasted so crisp to him. Not since he was laughing and being held by a man with cold clouds for hands.

"My boy?"

"Midoriya," he says suddenly, his tongue heavy.

"I'm sorry?"

"That's my name. Midoriya Izuku." Izuku is focused on the sand. "Thought you'd want to know."

All Might brightens even more. "Well, in that case!" He bends low to look Izuku in the face, still smiling. "How would you like to train with me, Young Midoriya?"

This time, Izuku hears the waves and the birds so clearly that he questions how he missed them in the first place. "What?"

"You have only told me about your friend, so how about you, young man?" He places his hands on his hips. "How would *you* like to be a hero?"

Izuku cannot help it: he steps back, stumbling in the sand. He nearly trips but at the last moment catches himself. The breeze has only

strengthened, seeming to purr with encouragement. If only the boy right here had a way of knowing just how much the words hanging before him will change the course of his life and many others.

Do I? I've always wanted to be. But can I? Do I even dare to dream for that much?

The thing is, this is what destroyed Izuku in the very beginning: the longing for something he could never have.

Izuku is stuck, because if he breaks and says he *can't* be a hero, All Might most assuredly would not accept that answer. Not after his entire spiel. No, Izuku has to go for a different approach.

And this urge to run away from what Izuku loves more than anything is a sort of sadism he can no longer pretend to understand. "I'm… I'm sorry, sir. I don't think I, uh, want to be one. Not right now."

Maybe not ever.

And for a moment, there's a change to All Might's expression. It's simple, and it's brief, but Izuku sees it. It looks like disappointment, it looks like sadness.

But then it's replaced with his usual shining enthusiasm quicker than it appeared, so he doesn't dwell on it.

"That's quite alright! The training does not have to be exclusively for making you a hero. It can be just to help you be the best *you!"* His voice lowers a little as he adds, almost hopefully, "And if you eventually change your mind about the hero thing, that's great, too!"

I won't, Izuku thinks, but he finds himself nodding anyway.

All Might punches the air with a fist, not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Great! We can meet here every morning to start your training! We can use your little method of cleaning this beach to help with strengthening your body! Very good job with that, by the way. Oh, I hope you're prepared!"

Izuku starts. Woah, *woah, why are we going so fucking fast?*

The hero begins talking about diets and training regimes, explaining that at first it might be easy for Izuku since he appears to already be in moderately good shape, but that the training will progressively become harder. At some point, they even exchange phone numbers.

But Izuku is barely paying attention. He's too shocked that all of this is happening. Training? With *All Might,* of all people?

There's no way. Five-year-old Izuku would be having a meltdown right now. Even Kacchan would be in shock!

One thing that Izuku notices, though, is that All Might doesn't once mention One for All in his ramblings. He doesn't talk about the process, about its history—none of it. Izuku kind of guessed that that would be the case, but still.

Izuku's just admitted that he doesn't even know if he wants to be a hero, so All Might doesn't have a reason to tell him about his quirk. But then there's the question of why he is so dead-set on training the boy when they've only had a few minutes of interaction time.

He has done nothing to warrant this attention. He's just a kid who almost—*stupidly*—got killed by a villain but was saved by All Might himself. The hero probably saves a bunch of people every day, so why him?

Is all of this even worth it? Is *Izuku* worth it?

I really shouldn't be here. I don't deserve to stand next to you, or even to accept this training. Not with what my father did to you, and certainly not with what I've done.

Regardless, All Might looks excited as he talks, and he shoots back and forth between his larger form and his normal form quite a few times, with the occasional blood spurting from his lips.

All Might looks like an oversized golden retriever. That's what he reminds him of. Izuku can see it now.

He doesn't give the boy any time to interrupt, not that Izuku would have tried to given how guilty he feels at the moment. He wouldn't dare shut the man down when he sounds so hopeful. So *good* and *honest.*

This is not a good idea, that's for sure. It's most definitely not, but the boy ultimately decides that he can't do anything about it now. This might very well backfire on him.

But he guesses that only time will tell.

The Underground Club is exactly what it sounds like.

It's a club, and it's underground.

Hidden under a law firm, the club is pretty secretive. Of course, the firm does know about them. They run it, after all.

This club is not like any other clubs, and Izuku isn't just saying that. This club is sort of like a hangout spot for a lot of vigilantes, antiheroes, and even the occasional underground hero.

Izuku thanks the skies that he's never seen Eraserhead in here. He doubts the man even knows about it with how under wraps everything is.

Back to the point—you could call this the common room for all the people and groups that don't exactly abide by the law but also aren't full-on villains.

There's drinks, some food, a pool table, and even some card games set up.

It's more like a bar, honestly, but calling it a club sounds better. The Underground Bar sounds like it could have a number of double meanings. And none of them are good.

Everyone goes quiet when he walks in. There's a lot of people in tonight, some of them smoking and placing bets and throwing darts, while others are sitting around chatting. Could be for business, could just be for fun.

Izuku isn't wearing his Rabbit costume. He's in what he calls his casual clothing. A dark green hoodie with black sweatpants, red and green sneakers—he looks like any other person on the street. His hair is pulled back in a ponytail and hidden by his hood, and he still has a plain black mask on and his contacts in.

He likes to think that everyone is staring at him because of his roguishly good looks, but he knows it's probably because he's the youngest one in there by *far*.

Everyone in the underground knows his name. Rabbit is sort of a celebrity, much to Izuku's chagrin.

So it's only natural that they'll stare and then look away after a few moments. There's a strict *no-unwarranted-fighting* policy inside the building, so if they want to start a fight with him, they'd have to actually ask him so they can take it into the ring at the back.

He's gotten into plenty of fights before. Sadly, no one has challenged him in the last few months. Not for real. He's gotten the occasional friendly spar, though.

He heads to the side counter, giving a few waves and nods in greeting to the others around him. No one speaks to him, though.

His friendlier vigilantes and partners aren't in, it seems.

"Rabbit," the lady at the front says. She has horns on her head, kind of like a dragon's. She can produce poison from the tips, which is partially where she gets her name. "Back again early I see."

"Yep. Just here to cash out my recent dues."

She nods and pulls out a tablet to check his profile, looking back up after a few moments. "Alright, just give me a second while I get your stuff."

The lady goes into the back behind the bar, and Izuku whistles as he waits.

The club is also a good place to get clients and unclaimed jobs. Most of them pay really good, which is part of the reason Izuku was introduced to this place a couple years back. He's been banking off of it ever since, as he's never been picky about which jobs he gets. The club sells weapons, tech, and even valuable information.

That last one is new—Izuku still remembers in the beginning when they would only provide weapons and technology, not so much stolen documents.

The boy is proud to say that he helped make that happen.

When she comes back with his cash, he pockets it without saying a word. Something has caught his attention on the back wall by the wine. "Hey, what's that?"

"Oh, this?" Dragon lady picks up the object and brings it over for him to hold. "That's an itchy smoke bomb. Just got it in a few days ago."

“A *itchy* smoke bomb?” He says excitedly, passing it between his hands like a baseball.

She hums in amusement. “Yeah. We’ve only got a few left; they’re a hit with the antis here.”

He ends up buying three of them on impulse without anymore questions. Can you blame him, really? It just sounds so cool!

Sitting at a small table in the corner of the room, he starts to work on them. Dragon lady had said that the smoke is white, so he wants to change that. Maybe he can make one of them multicolored, like a rainbow, and the last two black.

The black smoke is good for stealth, while the rainbow one is good for pissing people off. Sounds perfect.

He’s almost finished with the second black one when his phone buzzes in his hoodie pocket.

Oh, he thinks. It seems his victim has texted back.

Izuku checks the conversation with a wide grin.

How did you get this number? Who is this?

Wouldn’t he like to know, huh? Izuku doesn’t think he’ll grace him with an answer to the last question. The man should be able to figure it out.

He types back quickly: *The same way I got Tsukauchi’s.*

It’s five minutes later when he gets another notification.

This phone number has blocked you. You cannot receive texts or interact with this number again.

Izuku starts to cackle like a maniac, earning a few nervous looks from the people closest to him. The hero thinks that’ll stop him? How dumb does he think Izuku is?

He can’t wait to terrorize the man. Izuku’s already complained to Tsukauchi about the less-than-stellar experience he had with Eraserhead, and he’s yet to get a reply.

Probably because the detective realizes just how dumb it was to send a hero after him.

He's finished with the smoke bombs, so he's ready to leave. He's planning to wash his clothes at the laundromat, so he might as well get a move on.

That's his plan, at least, until one of his clients walk up to him and offer him another job, persisting even after Izuku tells them that's he on a one-week hiatus.

The boy is ashamed to admit that he stays an extra hour at the club listening to his client's explanation, but he doesn't regret it one bit.

Oh, Izuku can't wait until the week is up. He's going to *throw down.*

Doing laundry sucks.

Well, not totally. If Izuku actually had a working washing machine and dryer at his place, he probably wouldn't be complaining. But he doesn't, so here he is, sitting in this *disgusting* laundromat and waiting for his clothes to finish washing.

It smells like burnt rubber in here, but also like the confusing odor of multiple laundry detergents and soaps mixed together.

It's not necessarily bad, but it gets on Izuku's nerves anyway.

He takes a bite of his Slim Jim, bobbing his head to his playlist of this really old artist.

He put his Rabbit costume in the washer as well, having picked it up at his apartment after dropping off his smoke bombs.

Which reminds Izuku that he has to change his bandages when he gets back. His stitches still have to stay in for a while, but his bandages have to be reapplied twice every day to avoid infection.

At least the boy thinks so. It's not like he's gone to medical school.

The washer turns green, so Izuku finishes his Slim Jim and starts to take everything out, pushing a few coins into the dryer to start it.

This new song is interesting. It's about some student punching one of their classmates for stealing their potential boyfriend, but the artist still manages to make it sound good without being weird.

He steps back, only to bump into someone. Izuku's not surprised—his senses don't work very well when he's listening to music, which is exactly why he does it here. It's an escape.

Izuku immediately turns around and pops an earbud out of his ear, apologies spilling from his lips.

But then he stops. Because what the actual *fuck*.

The man is tall, but not as tall as All Might. He has long blond hair and green eyes that have a dark swirl in place of their pupils. He's wearing red rectangular glasses and light grey sweatpants with a plain white shirt, his muscles clearly defined through the thin fabric.

They're built more for speed than for strength, though it's obvious the man isn't lacking.

"It's alright," the blond insists. "I didn't see you there either!"

Izuku recognizes him immediately. This is the man who scared off those bullies in the alleyway.

It's the voice that gives it away, along with the hair. It's pulled back in the same hairstyle he had when Izuku first saw him. It's definitely him—Izuku doesn't mess up little details like that.

He prays that the man won't stop, that he'll just keep going on his way to wash the basket of clothes he's got in his hands, because this is already so fucking awkward, but of *course* Izuku doesn't get his way. The universe never listens to what he wants.

The man's eyes light up in recognition, and he slips off his headphones and lets them hang by his neck, setting the basket on one of the washers beside him.

"Oh, it's you, little listener! How are ya?"

Izuku curses at the world. Why does everything hate him? He's just a magnet for trouble, isn't he? Why can't he just—

He said listener.

Listener.

Izuku is, to put it simply, a dumbass. How has he not put the pieces together already? The blond hair, the personality of a radio show host, the swirling eyes, kind of like a cockatoo's—the man even called him

listener back in the alley when he helped him that day.

This is Present fucking Mic.

Izuku kind of wants to pass out. First Eraserhead, then All Might, and now Present Mic? Just how involved is his life getting? Is he the main character?

He used to listen to Present Mic's radio show all the time, and he *loved* this man—still kind of does, actually. The pro has been steadily rising in the recent hero rankings, Izuku knows that much. He hasn't caught up on the man's life, though. He doesn't know where he's at, or how his show is going.

This feels like a fever dream.

"Kiddo?"

Oh, right. He asked him a question.

Izuku flounders, stepping back to lean against his washer and dryer set, trying to give the man more room. "Oh, I'm fine! I've been doing great!"

"Well that's good." The hero smiles sweetly, and it looks too real to be fake. "The cut above your eye healed up nicely, yeah? I'm glad you're alright."

He remembered that? Why does Izuku feel so happy about that?

"Yeah, I—I heal pretty fast, so…" He winces after saying it. Why did he bother mentioning that? Actually, it doesn't matter. He needs to take advantage of this! "Uh, Present Mic! Can—Can you sign my notebook, please? You don't have to, obviously! I was just wondering, since, um, I didn't really ask the last time and we're both already here so—"

"Oh, you do know who I am!" He sounds amused but more flattered than anything else. "I thought you might with those clothes you have on."

Izuku suddenly feels very self-conscious even though he knows the voice hero didn't mean it like that. It's weird how he didn't care about his looks or attitude at all when it came to All Might or Eraserhead—but when it comes to Present Mic, a hero who loves fashion just as much as he loves yelling, everything suddenly matters more.

Izuku probably looks pretty homeless right now in his oversized Hawks t-shirt and his Ryukyu pajama pants. Oh, he's glad that he didn't decide to wear his Edgeshot socks today.

Present Mic dumps his laundry into his own washer, continuing to talk to him even with his back slightly turned. "And of course I'll sign your notebook, kiddo."

This prompts Izuku to go rushing back to his seat, taking the journal out of his bag and frantically flipping to a page. The voice hero gives him a teasing look when Izuku hands him the Ingenium-themed pen.

Oh my God. This is actually happening.

Izuku is vibrating at a frequency that could break glass once the man hands it back to him, and he hugs the journal to his chest as he bends down low. "Thank you!"

The voice hero lets out a *no problem* before finishing his load of clothes, already starting to whistle a tune to himself.

Izuku is in heaven, and he has to force himself out of his stupor before he makes a fool out of himself. He does *not* want to be embarrassed, nope.

Music is still blasting on one side of his head, and he pops his earbud back in and repeats the song that had started.

It'll be about thirty minutes before his laundry is done, so he's just going to sit there and do what he does best: analyze.

He opens his notebook back to Present Mic's page and starts to make an entirely new analysis on him. He sketches the man in his hero clothing, as he's pretty much memorized it by now, and jots down a few more notes about him and his style choices.

His on air personality is very much exaggerated, but he's reportedly a nice, sweet teacher for his students at UA while also a badass pro hero who doubles as a radio host. The man is incredible, and his intelligence is off the charts. There's a reason he's an A rank pro hero with high stats.

Someone pokes him in the shoulder, and Izuku jolts, snapping the notebook shut and yanking his earbud out yet again as he turns to stare, wide-eyed, at the culprit.

Present Mic is looking at him with a hand outstretched, sitting two seats over and looking a little concerned. Oh. The man must've been trying to get his attention.

"Sorry!" Izuku says, nails digging into his palms as his cheeks flush an even darker shade of red. "What did—what did you say, sir?"

"'S alright, listener, I was just asking why you're out here so late at night. It is past curfew for kiddos your age."

Curfew. Izuku suddenly remembers that a curfew does, in fact, exist for children who are underage. The boy never follows that law, so he's kind of forgotten it even exists. Besides, most of the cops around here know him. As long as he's not using his quirk in public or being a little shit, they usually turn a blind eye to him being out late.

Doesn't stop them from snitching on him to Tsukauchi, though, which usually earns him another lecture the next time he sees the man.

The hero must see the panic on his face, because he gives him another reassuring smile. "You're not in trouble or anything, I was just curious. I was never a stickler to that rule either."

It sounds genuine, but Izuku still hates how easily he believes him. He also hates how easily the lie slips from his own mouth. "My dad told me to do the laundry, but I kinda forgot. He's getting back from a business trip in the morning, so, uh, yeah."

For a second, Present Mic just peers at him. He doesn't respond, and there's not enough light in the laundromat for Izuku to see what his expression looks like, so the boy waits with bated breath on his reaction.

He hums after what seems like forever, but what could've only been a few seconds. "That's fair. And by the way, listener, I'm off-duty right now, so you can just call me Yamada."

Yamada. That's his last name. Being a pro hero with relatively high rankings, most people know that. It's not a secret.

Izuku opens his notebook back up, still a little shaken. He doesn't like the look Yamada had given him during the brief pause. The man is, again, very intelligent.

Did he notice the lie? Why not call him out on it if so? Izuku is too tired for this.

He can barely focus on even his analyses, so he instead listens to the music playing in one earbud. He doesn't dare put the other one in, not wanting to risk another incident. He's learned from his mistake.

And so he actually hears what happens next the first time.

Present Mic is giggling now. Like a little schoolgirl.

Izuku frowns, wanting to ask what he's laughing at, but he stops himself. That's none of his business. He has no right to ask, so he continues writing.

Present Mic, however, doesn't seem to think so, as he glances at him brightly. "My coworker just had an impromptu painting of him on a billboard today. Apparently some vigilante around here made it to get back at him for being an ass." He blocks his mouth suddenly. "'Scuse the language, listener."

But Izuku didn't listen to the curse word—he's heard and *said* way worse himself—as he's suddenly frozen solid. It can't be.

Why does this keep happening to him?

Yamada leans over and shows him the picture on his phone, and sure enough, it's the painting that Izuku spray painted with Kacchan not five hours before. It's a little bit painted over, unfortunately, as the excellent drawing of Eraserhead—an *underground* hero—is not something that should be seen by the public. They must've taken it down real quick.

The painting is still all mostly there, at least in the picture. It's a silhouette of Eraserhead with his most defining features: his unkept black hair, the capture weapon wrapped around his neck, and his neon yellow goggles. In bold, rainbow letters, the words *Eat My Ass* cover the top.

Izuku made sure to add glitter everywhere, because why not?

Yamada tries to block the swear word with his hand, but it doesn't matter. It's not like Izuku had written it or anything. No, not at all.

"He doesn't appreciate the talent as much as I do. I mean, look at the detail! It was obviously done in a rush, but it looks great!"

Izuku gapes, looking at the voice hero with a newfound sparkle to his eyes, because *finally, someone appreciates my artistic abilities.*

“I agree,” Izuku says, looking back down at his lap. “I think the dick painted on his forehead makes it a whole lot better, too. Really ties it all in.”

Yamada laughs, and Izuku can’t help but wonder if the voice hero would still smile at him like that if he knew the truth.

Considering the voice hero’s abrasive personality, he probably would.

Izuku laughs with him, and it’s not until later that he realizes it wasn’t forced.

Chapter End Notes

> i really love present mic. that man could burst my eardrums with his quirk and i would hold his head in my hands so very softly and not think of him anything less
>
> dadmic rights!! and sled gang!!
>
> h

moment of doubt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku looks up at Endeavor's Agency from the sidewalk, and logically, he knows it's a bad idea.

He knew it as soon as his client explained the job, as soon as he mentioned it had *anything* to do with the number two pro hero. He should've walked away when he saw the name on the job report. No amount of money is worth getting busted trying to rob a place that houses Endeavor and all of his sidekicks, where Izuku will, without a doubt, be outnumbered and easily caught if something goes wrong.

And something usually does go wrong. It's just Izuku's luck. It's his curse, and his birthright.

Though, despite his bad feelings, despite knowing better, here Izuku is, slipping into the alleyway beside the very intimidating building, about to make the climb. He's drawn to this place, knowing that the hero who works here is second only to All Might himself.

Sometimes, Izuku wonders if the Symbol of Peace would be disappointed in him if he found out about his vigilante counterpart, and he wonders what the man thinks about Rabbit, if he even thinks about him at all. He hasn't exactly stood out lately except for the incident with the sludge villain a couple weeks back, so there's no reason for someone as powerful as All Might to pay him any attention.

All Might stands for justice and tranquility, and he's a pillar of hope for the people of Japan and even for the rest of the world. He advises everyone to help keep the peace, no matter the hardships that come along with doing that.

Standing at the bottom of Endeavor's agency after disabling all of the thermal recognition sensors around the area, it's clear Izuku's doing the exact opposite of what All Might preaches.

He's *looking* for trouble, not solving it. He may be doing it as a means for survival, perhaps, but this stunt, this *job,* is about more than that. He's searching for something.

He just doesn't know what.

Izuku flips his hood over his head, making sure it won't get in the way, then starts his climb. He has to be quick about this, as the next patrol comes by in twenty-five seconds and will assuredly see him if he remains at the base of the building. Endeavor is a paranoid man, and this makes it so his agency is one of the harder ones to get into.

He constantly has security patrols, but the only good thing is that there's only two of them protecting the outside of the building. With over four walls and corners making up the outside, there are places that are out of sight for a small stretch of time.

And twenty-five seconds is enough for Izuku.

The climb goes quick with his adhesive gloves, and just seconds later he's pushing himself up and over the balcony on the top floor, hidden away from the eyes of the public and the security patrols from the ground level. It's the same balcony he's seen Endeavor jump onto countless of times after finishing patrol.

This must be his own private office, which is exactly where Izuku needs to be.

He readjusts his hood and mask one last time and walks across the ledge to the door. Of course it'll be locked—Endeavor may be a bitch, but he's not stupid. If Izuku so much as touches the handle to open it, alarms will start to blare all around him. He'll be caught in less time than it takes for Izuku to make a villain cry, and that's saying something.

So it's a good thing all of the cameras are down for around ten minutes in this section of the top floor.

Completely unrelated, of course. I wouldn't dare mess with Endeavor's security systems unless I had a reason to.

Singing to himself, Izuku uses Pull to carefully peel off the transparent sensor—a thin sleeve that covers the handle of the door and checks for fingerprints—without making it go off. He then powers up his leg and kicks at the door handle, effectively breaking the handle off in one clean sweep. He catches it before it can clatter to the ground, and he lets out a relieved breath when he hears no alarms or sirens.

He then takes one of his electronic probes and jabs it into the now exposed hole in the door—the electronic lock buzzes and then clicks, and Izuku is in.

He nudges open the balcony door and peeks inside.

Sure, it's a little strange that there's no one else here, but he presses on anyways. Maybe it really is going to be this easy. He's outsmarted plenty of heroes before now, so maybe they're all just this stupid and incompetent.

Still, he isn't careless about it. He's just a little hesitant. After he steps inside, he looks around the room and checks out the high-ceiling appreciatively. There are scorch marks in some places on the walls, obviously from the hero's quirk. Did he activate it out of rage back then? Or maybe excitement?

He doesn't like where his train of thought goes after that last one.

Izuku focuses on his senses, finding nothing out of the ordinary. There's no one here, and there's no hidden tripwires or anything. He's in the clear.

And now he has his eyes on the prize, or, rather, his client's prize. A statue sits near the large double doors, made out of what looks like hollow gold. It's a lion, and if Izuku didn't know any better, he would've presumed it to be a regular statue.

But he *does* know better. He knows, thanks to his extensive research the night before and his helpful client, that this statue also happens to double as a safe. A safe that should, if Izuku's information is correct, contain in-depth records of Endeavor's latest missions and targets. Villains that he's already apprehended, and also ones that he hasn't.

Not yet.

These files are worth way more than the lousy police records Izuku downloaded from Tsukauchi's computer that day. He'll have to scan these files for himself before handing them over for payment. It might prove to be useful to him, which is obviously why his client gave him the job in the first place.

The lion glowers at him, mouth open in a permanent snarl. It looks like it's taunting the vigilante even without being alive. Izuku doesn't know why Endeavor chose a *lion* of all animals to hide his secrets away, and he doesn't really care to find out.

Each step brings him closer to the double pay he was promised. It'll be enough to keep Izuku from pickpocketing rich jerks on subways—or from taking on another job like this one—for at least a few weeks.

Enough time to repair some of my weapons. I need to make more grenades.

And besides, Izuku will get more time to focus on his training with All Might, something that the boy doesn't mind nearly as much as he thought he would when the hero suggested it a week ago.

He's glad that the training is easy, at least for now. His stomach still hurts a lot every day, and he only took out his stitches this morning—he probably shouldn't have—but he reckons he's alright.

Checking to make sure the alarms are still down, he takes out his staff and swings with all his force at the head of the mammal, right behind its left ear.

Is that it? Izuku thinks, panicked. *That should be the trigger.*

For a moment, nothing seems to happen, but then there's the sound of metal scraping against metal, and a little compartment pops open in its chest. A keypad sits inside, and words flash on the small screen.

Facial recognition required. Initiating full body scan. Please do not move.

Izuku takes the end of his staff and sends it smashing straight into the glass, shattering it completely and revealing the mess of wires behind it. There are no alarms yet, but Izuku has to hurry. He only set the security systems to be on loop for ten minutes. They'll be coming back on soon—maybe even sooner if one of Endeavor's sidekicks notices the breach.

He sets down his weapon and carefully pops off the door to the safe, eyes widening once he sees what's in it. There's no money, of course. Izuku isn't a fool—Endeavor is too rich to actually carry around bills. But there is a thick folder, along with a few pictures of the hero's family that Izuku doesn't give a damn about.

They may still be useful, however.

He picks up the folder, turning it over in his hands and peeking at its contents.

As promised, there must be a hundred different files in here, each containing the names and details of Endeavor's closest allies and enemies. Flipping through them, Izuku can see pictures of battle scenes, and even some handwritten notes in the margins by the number two hero himself.

He's gonna be so pissed when he realizes someone took this.

He sets it on the ground for a moment and picks his staff back up, sliding it into the harness over his back as he gets ready to leave. He doesn't bother trying to shut the safe. He *wants* Endeavor to know someone was here. Hell, he wants him to be thinking about it for weeks.

When Izuku stands up, he freezes. Something—something feels *wrong.*

"Too easy," Izuku whispers. He rubs at the corner of the folder with the pads of his fingers, and not a speck of dust clings to them, which just goes to show how important the files are.

I broke into Endeavor's agency to steal really important documents, so why am I not I being attacked right now by one of his sidekicks? Even with the cameras down, I expected better from the number two hero.

And, really, Izuku just had to think that, huh?

There's a shift in the air, and wind blasts at the back of Izuku's neck. The vigilante turns just in time to see a flash of gray fabric coming towards him. He drops to the ground and rolls to the side, barely dodging the capture weapon as it wraps around the space he occupied moments before.

Izuku's breath hitches as he crouches low to the floor, facing the intruder with his bōstaff clutched in one hand, folder in the other. *Well, this is familiar.*

"Strange, isn't it?"

Eraserhead stands just under ten yards away from the boy, right in front of the open balcony doors. He's staring at him, but for how long? He couldn't have been there the whole time. Just couldn't have.

Izuku would have—*should* have—felt his quirk. He feels him now, of course, now that he's made himself known, but the panic rising in his throat doesn't seem to die down at all.

"You look like a moth," is the first thing Izuku says. The boy blinks, surprised at his own stupidity, before straightening back up from his crouched position. "Has anyone ever told you that, Eraser?"

"Once or twice. What's in your hand?"

Crisp, succinct, his tone of voice tells Izuku that despite his question, the man knows *exactly* what's going on here, and what Izuku is holding. "A copy of Endeavor's search history. Thought it'd make for good blackmail. Did you know he's into temperature play?"

He gets an unimpressed look from the man. "I thought you only steal from bad guys."

Endeavor is a bad guy, Izuku wants to say, but he bites his tongue. Now is not the time to start a debate, even though the boy has a feeling the underground hero would agree with him on his views.

"I don't recall ever saying that," he says instead, trying to distract him. There's not much else to do when Izuku is frantically trying to come up with a plan whilst simultaneously freaking out over the fact that Eraserhead found him so quickly, that he's here, in this room, and Izuku didn't *notice.*

And that—that shouldn't be *possible.*

"Didn't have to," Eraserhead says. He starts a slow, methodical walk from his place by the balcony, creeping closer to Izuku. "Your records told me a lot about you."

He's bluffing. He has to be. Izuku has taken a lot of measures to make sure nothing important is found out about him. The man doesn't know anything that Izuku doesn't want him to. Right?

Izuku takes a couple of steps back to make up for the distance Eraserhead is gaining. The hero notices and stops approaching.

"It's been a week," the man continues, suddenly sounding much more serious. The change has Izuku shivering. "Have you come to a decision?"

Decision? For Izuku to make a decision, he'd first have to have a choice in the matter. And there is no choice, not for Izuku. He's already thought about it, already talked it over with Kacchan.

Izuku trusts Tsukauchi, he really does. The detective has admitted that he truly does want the best for him, and Izuku doesn't need a lie detecting quirk to be able to tell that's he's telling the truth.

But once Izuku turns himself in, it's basically a death sentence. Not legally, since he's still a minor, but when has the government ever done things *legally?* At the very worst, in the public's eyes, he'll get

some time in jail or be put on house arrest for the unforeseeable future. He'll be put through some program like any other juvenile delinquent, and he'll just have to live with the words *ex-vigilante* on his record for the rest of his life.

But that's not what will really happen. He'll be checked over by the doctors, of course. They'll find out about his quirk—no, *quirks.*

They'll make the connection between him and his father, and then they'll take him away. The government is good at that. No one will blink an eye at the disappearance of a vigilante once the Commission gets involved. He'll then suffer a fate worse than death, worse than whatever Tsukauchi or Eraserhead seems to think will happen to him if he doesn't turn himself in.

Because if Izuku is caught by the Hero's Commission, his father will feel inclined to involve himself.

Izuku lets venom seep into his voice when he speaks. "Decision, huh? Let me think about it for a second, I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

Eraserhead grimaces, which is more of a reaction than Izuku thought he'd get. The man takes another step, only to stop at the way Izuku raises his bōstaff in warning. "Listen, kid, I admit that I could've had more tact regarding our last conversation."

I wouldn't go so far as to call it a conversation. Felt pretty one-sided to me.

The hero clears his throat, though the indifference on his face stays. "It was wrong of me to come onto you like that. You have no reason to trust me, so I had no right to act like you owed me something. Though you're technically still a criminal, Rabbit, you've done a lot of good for a lot of people. Even I can recognize that."

"I get it. You're just doing your job," Izuku says quietly, and he kind of means it, too. He can't fault him too much when the man could've just spared him the ultimatum and captured him straightaway. As much as he hates to admit it, Izuku doesn't think he would've stood a chance against him at that moment, not while he was injured at least. "Though what I do want to know is how you got roped into all of this."

He means *why.* Why does Eraserhead care, or at least act like he does, when that makes everything so much more difficult.

“You’re young. I can tell just by the way you talk, even with that voice changer. You can’t be any older than my school’s first years.” His expression softens just a fraction, and Izuku wishes it wouldn’t. Wishes the man didn’t decide to be so open with him. “It isn’t everyday a teenager with skills like yours chooses to become a hero instead of a villain.”

Izuku looks down at the folder cradled in his hand. He’s fucked. He’s caught with no way out. At least no way out that doesn’t involve going through Eraserhead, who has, once again, started to move closer and closer to him. He’s slow and careful, as if Izuku is a scared, wounded animal that will bolt or attack if he’s caught off guard.

And honestly, that’s not far from the truth.

“You know what that contains?” Eraserhead asks, gesturing to the folder held tightly in Izuku’s hand.

Izuku doesn’t answer immediately. *He could be stalling until backup arrives. I have to get out of here.*

When it’s clear the hero isn’t going to continue without a reply, the vigilante looks away, towards the clock hanging above Endeavor’s desk. “I know enough.”

Eraserhead makes a noncommittal noise. “I’m sure you know how dangerous those files can be when dropped into the wrong hands.” A tilt of his head. “But that isn’t your problem, is it? Ignorance means you don’t have to feel guilty when things get screwed up, right?”

Izuku backs up some more, back hitting the double doors to the office. He doesn’t like the way Eraserhead keeps tightening the room by closing the distance between them. He doesn’t like the way it makes him feel trapped, or the way the man keeps trying to poke holes in his conscience, in the way he rationalizes what he’s doing.

The man was just praising him, soothing his rising anxiety, but now he’s back to being the pro hero Eraserhead. Rabbit is his mission, after all, and he has to finish it.

Izuku lifts a shoulder in a stiff shrug. “I don’t give out information to just anybody. If something goes wrong, or turns bad, I fix it.”

“That’s not how the Hero Commission sees it,” Eraserhead says. “And whoever you’re doing this for, I’m sure you know they can’t be trusted, at least not fully. I don’t mean to be insensitive when I say

this, kid, but you can't possibly know for sure what that person will do with the information you're holding right now."

As much as Izuku wants to scream at the jab at his perception and his *very untrustworthy* client, he keeps his jaw tight, his eyes set on the balcony behind the hero before looking back down at the folder in his hand.

It doesn't feel dangerous. It doesn't have an aura of power or feel like anything at all. It's just a couple hundred pieces of copy paper with some ink on it. It has a few thousand names and dates, and that's it. The more he looks at it, the more he's convinced that it does nothing except look important and tease, that the hero is lying.

Izuku supposes he shouldn't be surprised. Adults can't be trusted to tell the truth, or to do much of anything good.

"Who said I'm doing this for someone else? I like to treat myself sometimes."

It sounds flat, even to Izuku, and so the vigilante isn't surprised when Eraserhead just blinks at him, unfazed. "Most of your jobs involve money. I doubt you'd be doing something as risky as this without some sort of reward at the end."

Does he know about the club? I know there's probably a few informants and bugs in there, but I didn't think Eraserhead would know about it.

Or the hero could be bluffing, trying to push Izuku into submission without the boy realizing it.

Izuku's eyes flash back towards the doors and windows, towards freedom, and he watches how Eraserhead tracks the movement with his own eyes.

"Just hand the folder over. Do the right thing. If not for me or Tsukauchi, than for yourself."

"And I walk out of here?"

"No," Eraserhead says. Another step. "You were never going to just walk out of here, but if you hand over that very expensive piece of government property, I can help you."

And there it is again. The *help* thing. He wants Izuku to trust him, and at the moment the boy wants nothing more than for the hero to go

fuck himself. They've been over the trust thing. So why is Eraserhead still *trying?*

And why is he being so *gentle* about it? He still sounds so matter-of-fact, too. Izuku wonders how the hero manages to pull that off.

The thing is, Izuku doesn't know how the pro hero defines help. Maybe to him, help is calling the cops or sending him somewhere for troubled teens, or maybe Eraserhead's idea of help is locking him up in some prison where they'll never let him see the light of day again.

Some people are twisted like that. Some people like to twist words.

Izuku doesn't want Eraserhead to be *some people.* He hopes to god he isn't.

"I think you're lying." Izuku watches the man closely for any tells. For an eye twitch—something. But all he gets is a raise of his left brow. It could be read as a sign of irritation, or even amusement, but Izuku has a feeling that it's neither of those. The hero is trying to figure him out, *has* been, ever since their first discussion. "I think you set this up, knowing I'd come here. That's how you caught me so quickly."

Caught him red-handed, like a parent catching their kid with their hand in the cookie jar.

Eraserhead stares, curiosity and indifference fighting for control in his every movement. It looks like an act. Or the boy is looking too much into this, and the hero truly is examining him so openly.

He's good at that, Izuku thinks. *Making me question myself. Practiced.*

"Is that what you think, kid?" His tone never changes, but he moves closer again. Hands now settled in his pockets.

Izuku feels closed in.

"Those files are real. I did nothing except put word out on the street about where they were located. I figured you'd come looking for them. If not for yourself, than for someone not brave enough to break into the number two hero's agency."

Strange, isn't it?

Of course Eraserhead said that. He knew Izuku would find the whole thing too easy. Knew Izuku would do it anyway. So is he really that

predictable? Izuku has walked straight into his trap.

His instincts were right. He should've listened to his gut.

"Kid, if you turn yourself in, I promise that I'll do everything I can to make sure you'll be alright. I'll work towards that trust, understand? Even if you don't believe me right now, I promise that I'll help you. You just have to meet me halfway."

And for a moment, Izuku allows himself to think about what would happen if he'd cave. If he'd just *do it* and say that dreadful word. Maybe Eraserhead would be able to protect him. Maybe Izuku is just too paranoid, too anxious, too scared to admit that he might actually be okay if he laid down his weapons.

Izuku, for some reason, doubts himself.

But then he remembers his father's face, he remembers the number three hero's predicament, how he's nothing but a tool for the Hero Commission, and then the moment is over and the clock is ticking.

He has less than a minute before the security systems come back on. The doors behind him will burst open, and Izuku will most definitely be screwed.

He has to run. *Right now.* That's his only choice. Izuku's escaped Eraserhead before, right? Well, not escaped; the man *let* him go, but that's besides the point. This shouldn't be too much difficulty.

Oh, how wrong he is.

Izuku slides the small bōstaff back into its harness. He stuffs his free hand into the inside of his costume's jacket, and to anyone else, it would look normal. Like something an angsty teen would do to avoid having to do something or to socialize with anyone.

But Izuku has pockets on the outside of his jacket like any normal piece of clothing. The ones on the inside are there to hold his weapons. His creations.

The boy almost feels bad for what he's about to do. Eraserhead doesn't *know,* so it's not his fault. It's not his fault that people are cruel. Izuku can't just turn himself in, not even with the promise the hero gave him.

It sounded genuine, too. That's the worst part.

Izuku hopes the *sorry* is written clear in his eyes as he meets Eraserhead's heavy gaze and tries for a laugh.

"You said I wouldn't be able to walk out of here, right? You never said anything about running."

The hero jolts. "Rabbit—"

What happens next seems to be in slow-motion. Izuku takes one of the smoke bombs out of his pocket and throws it at the floor with one jerk of his wrist, and at the same time, a screeching alarm starts to blare from the walls.

The thick black smoke expands more into a cloud, covering the whole room and seeping through the vents.

Izuku has to think fast. There's loud voices and quick footsteps coming from below. Endeavor's office seems to cover the entire top floor.

Well, fuck. It's either Rabbit versus Eraserhead, or Rabbit versus all of Endeavor's sidekicks.

And with the way the underground hero is flying at him with his capture weapon outstretched, the smoke billowing around him, having somehow pinpointed *exactly* where Izuku would be standing even with the fog obscuring his vision, the decision is made abundantly clear.

Izuku throws open the doors behind him and runs.

He hopes Endeavor's sidekicks aren't as capable as everyone says.

Shouta is unequivocally stupid. So *incredibly* stupid.

He's surprised the trap worked. He didn't expect Rabbit to actually go for it. He expected another petty criminal or thief to make some attempts, sure, but Shouta was under the impression that Rabbit had no reason to, no *need* to go this far.

He was obviously very wrong.

Money must be one of those reasons—and maybe it serves as the deciding factor for most of Rabbit's missions. That thought alone is enough to have Shouta frowning.

The vigilante is young. He should still be living with his parents, so he doesn't *need* that money, right?

Shouta never imagined someone as smart as Rabbit to risk his life like this for some cash.

Yes, his *life.* Because if Endeavor had somehow been here, having canceled his meeting or simply left early, Rabbit would probably be dead. The number two hero wouldn't think twice about frying a little vigilante over breaking and entering, so Shouta is eternally grateful Endeavor is *not* here.

That might change soon, though. He must be getting some sort of warning on the situation right now, wherever he is.

If Endeavor had been here in the first place, escaping would have been near impossible. He also wouldn't have taken kindly to Eraserhead being in his agency, especially on his own private floor.

He sees underground heroes as being lesser, and Shouta is no exception.

Speaking of escape—what the *fuck* is Rabbit thinking? And why does he have smoke bombs all of a sudden?

This is the first time he's used one, at least to Shouta's knowledge. He'll have to remember to ask Tsukauchi about it after this is over.

He flies down the stairs, slipping his goggles over his eyes as he listens for the brat. The windows on Endeavor's floor are bulletproof; Rabbit must've known this, which explains why he didn't go for them immediately.

He must be planning to go for the ones on the next floor down, as the entrance to the agency is most likely locked. If Shouta isn't mistaken, the locks slide in place automatically once any alarms go off. There's no point heading for the base level.

He lands at the bottom of the first flight of stairs and curses as he takes in the scene before him. The room is already in shambles and it's

only been five seconds. Rabbit is bouncing on top of the rows of desks and using the walls as leverage as he dodges the three heroes who lunge at him.

The interns are all scrambling back, away from the seemingly rabid vigilante and the ongoing fight. Endeavor's sidekicks are banding together and attempting to stop the chaos. There looks to be ten of them here at the moment, which isn't surprising. Shouta knows Endeavor has over thirty, so they must be out and about at this time of day.

Most of them are hanging back and protecting the interns while also watching the three other sidekicks try and take down the vigilante. They must not be able to all go for him at once—their quirks might make it difficult to fight close range or with partners.

Another smoke bomb suddenly goes off, this one rainbow colored, and Shouta takes this as his cue to rush forward, capture weapon in hand. He leaps onto a side table and crouches down low, straining to see through the smoke.

One of the sidekicks, a woman with long, flaming green hair that Shouta faintly recognizes as Burnin', turns to look at him with dark eyes. "Who are you?"

She's shouting to be heard over the yells of the other sidekicks and the alarms, and Shouta gives her a quick glance before searching the smoke again. "I'm a pro," he informs her curtly. "I was tasked with capturing him, so let me help."

She looks suspicious, but she must recognize him somewhat, as she just nods and disappears into the fog, looking for the others.

Shouta, however, looks *up*.

The smoke doesn't travel very high; it tends to get thicker down at the bottom, just like moisture in a cloud.

And there he is, just as Shouta predicted. Rabbit is sticking to the wall, head pressed against the ceiling. It has to be the gloves allowing him to do that, Shouta thinks, and now that he has a view of the vigilante's boots, he can see that there's something glossy painted over the bottoms.

Something that allows him to stick to surfaces? Is the gloss permanent, or does he have to reapply it every day?

The smoke is starting to clear just a little bit, and Shouta notices that the kid has purposefully thrown desks around to create obstacles in order to slow the sidekicks down. They don't know that he's *above* them, not running around them.

Shouta realizes suddenly that he's waiting for an opening—no, for the right *angle*.

He's trying to go out the window like Shouta thought. He doesn't want to fight or hurt anybody, it seems.

And Shouta sees the moment it happens. Rabbit's head snaps to the side, and Shouta follows the movement; a sidekick is moving out of the way and heading deeper into the fog, leaving a clear view of one of the bigger windows. Big enough for a teenager to fit through.

And then the boy *springs,* shooting across the room with surprising force and speed.

It's only on instinct that Shouta flings out his capture weapon, eyes itching as his quirk flares. His hair rises from his shoulders, and the gray fabric of his scarf only manages to wrap around the vigilante's ankle. Shouta yanks hard, and in the next moment the figure comes jerking towards him. But Rabbit doesn't make a sound, not even a pained grunt or breath; he only twists midair, free hand suddenly gripping his bōstaff. His finger moves quick across the metal, the weapon extending to reveal—is that a fucking *katana* at the end of it?

Shouta's eyes widen, and he watches, breath suspended, as the vigilante's arm comes down quick, the blade cutting through the smoke. A piece of his scarf is severed off a few inches away from the boy's ankle, setting him free.

Oh. He sliced right through it like the scarf is nothing but softened butter, like it isn't made from one of the strongest materials to ever be threaded into fabric.

But Rabbit is still sailing towards him from the leftover momentum, and Shouta brings his hands up to protect his face, being forced to blink at the sudden rush of air.

His quirk sizzles out, a mistake Shouta is made aware of a fraction of a second later.

Rabbit meets his gaze, and this close to each other, Shouta gets the chance to see the boy's eyes. They're a dark crimson, seemingly

glinting even without light. it looks like contacts—the sharpness is still there, the emotion too profound, too bright of a center; it has to be fake.

And then boots are hitting him squarely in the chest and Shouta is sent sprawling to the ground when Rabbit uses him as a *springboard.* He's flying back towards the window like a torpedo, and the sidekicks are rushing for him as well, the fog having cleared due to the commotion.

But he's too quick.

The window explodes on impact, and Rabbit disappears through it amidst the shattering glass.

Shouta is already up and running. He has to stop him *now,* dammit, or someone less forgiving will.

Burnin' looks at him in shock. "What are you doing? We're on the fifth __"

Shouta doesn't hear the rest of her sentence as he's currently flying out of the window himself, arms pulled to his body to keep from hitting the sides. The drop is long, and he puts together the fact that she meant to say *floor.* They're on the *fifth floor.*

There's a flash of dark green at the corner of his vision, but he can't do much about it with the ground rising up to meet his face. He braces for it, rolling once his feet hits the ground.

There's gasps, then some screams, and Shouta looks up to see a bunch of people crowding around him and the agency's entrance. They must've been drawn in by the alarm.

The hero shoves past them, eyes searching over the area he swears he just saw the vigilante running through.

Nothing.

"Where'd he go?" He asks sharply, glaring at the horde of onlookers. He despises the press as it is, but civilians are arguably a little more annoying when it comes to getting in the way of hero work.

A man with cat eyes points to a building across the road, and Shouta doesn't bother responding before taking off.

He has a feeling he won't find him. The boy is slippery.

And *this* is why Shouta feels stupid. He had him in his grasp, his capture weapon had been around him, and he just let him escape.

His one job. He only had to not let the kid get the best of him, and look where he's at now.

Rabbit is gone. After an entire hour of combing the streets, Shouta only stops his chase when Tsukauchi calls him and chews him out about not telling him that he set up a trap at Endeavor's Agency, and that he could've provided his men as backup.

And *fuck* is Shouta angry. Not at Rabbit, at himself. He should've just captured him. Shouldn't have let his emotions get in the way. He's been trained for that. He knows not to do stuff like that, and yet he's done it.

He gave Rabbit a chance. He should've just done his job and not let a teenager influence his actions.

But that's not entirely right, is it?

Shouta is irritated, sure. Irritated that he failed to bring him in, that the kid is going to be in even *more* danger now, and yet he doesn't feel an ounce of guilt. Maybe because he saw how scared the boy really was. Even with the mask and the contacts, Shouta could *see* it. He got a glimpse. Rabbit is scared, no, *terrified* at the prospect of turning himself in.

He's scared to death over it. So much so that he'd much rather go through Endeavor's sidekicks to avoid his biggest threat at the moment: Eraserhead.

Shouta is definitely stupid. He's so, so frustrated, and he finds himself stopping just before the edge of another roof. He's too distracted—he won't be of any use going on patrol. He has to head home now and gather his thoughts.

And it's not until he's halfway to the apartment he shares with his husband that he feels something digging into his neck. He moves to scratch his neck, and that's when he finds it: a folder, bent in half and pressed into the folds of his capture weapon.

He doesn't even have to look at its contents to know that it's the one.

The brat somehow managed to stick it in his scarf without him noticing, probably when he kicked him.

Shouta feels the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips, a little bit of the tension easing from his chest. *Playing mind games, huh, kid?*

And after the underground hero has slipped into his apartment and kissed Hizashi in greeting, he decides right then and there that he'll try to help the boy as much as he can. He promised, after all, and Shouta doesn't break his promises.

Izuku feels like he's going to pass out from running too long. He's a good city over, well outside his normal perimeters, which means he should be good.

He doesn't feel any eyes on him, so he slips behind a cat café and doubles over, clutching his stomach. His wound is jostled now, perhaps even torn. The skin is still healing, so it's delicate. He probably shouldn't have accepted the mission at all this soon after his injury.

It's still sore. His ankle hurts like hell after being jerked like that—oh yeah. His ankle.

The piece of fabric is still wrapped around it, a little piece hanging off from where he sliced through it. Which, now that he's safe and can think freely, he finds that he feels bad about it. That capture weapon must be a lot of money to fix.

All of this shit, and the boy still didn't even keep the folder.

Oh well. He got something of far more importance from this little adventure. Izuku can do without that money. Although it would've helped a great deal, Eraserhead is right. While he sort of trusts his client, there's no telling what could have happened if he did end up giving him the folder.

Izuku doesn't want to be responsible for something bad happening.

For now, though, he'll just focus on getting home. Maybe he can actually go to sleep, as he feels like he's going to pass out any second.

Yeah. Kacchan is going to kill me.

Chapter End Notes

t

ambitions

Chapter Notes

> 10k??? hits??? guys i love you all so much!! ty for the support! i don't like this chapter so much but I forced myself to get it out since it's kind of a filler. The next one will be better I promise!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Slower, honey. The slices have to be smooth. If you're sloppy, it won't look right."

"This *is* me going slow."

"Doesn't look like it."

Izuku grits his teeth and bites back a groan, his expression sour as Ms. Hanako moves him aside to show him how it's down. She takes the knife from his hand and positions it over the thick slab of pork in front of them.

"You have to focus," she explains, "but not too hard, or you'll mess up even more."

"Wow," Izuku says dryly. "That makes perfect sense."

The woman smiles and continues to cut the meat into clean, even strips. "It just takes practice. You're good with a knife, so it shouldn't take long to get the hang of it. You're just being impatient, is all. Now try again."

This is how the process usually goes for days like this. Ms. Hanako tells him how to do something, he fails at it, and then she shows him how to do it herself. It's frustrating sometimes, but she's right—he does eventually get it, most times within the hour. He's quick like that.

Well, as he said: most times.

"You're doing it wrong again." Her voice comes from the opposite side of the kitchen, and the boy glances back to see her busy kneading out dough.

"How? I'm doing exactly what you told me."

“The rhythm of the knife hitting the cutting board is off. You need to be less hesitant.” She sniffs. "'Sides, your slices are getting crooked."

Izuku squawks. “How do you know? You’re not even looking!"

The woman finishes kneading and wipes her hands on a cloth before walking to him. “You did good,” she observes. “But you’re still doing it with the result in mind. Try focusing on each individual slice, instead of on what you think the product should be.”

Izuku feels like his mind might just melt into the drains beneath them but does as instructed anyway, receiving an approving hum in return.

“See, that’s better.”

There is no difference, Izuku thinks, but he doesn't voice this. Ms. Hanako certainly knows best when it comes to cooking this type of food, so he won’t argue.

That’s not the purpose of this, anyway. He's not really caught up in the *art* of cooking, not like she is, at least. The purpose of this is for Ms. Hanako to teach him how to make cheaper meals to substitute for the diet plans All Might gave him.

The man didn’t spare him a second glance after dropping the book into his hands after training one day. He only told Izuku to read it through and tell him his suggestions on what to change or not. The book contains the exercise regimes and diets he has to follow—which is okay, Izuku isn’t upset; he expected something of the sort to be in their agreement, but still.

He just can’t afford to follow it. Like, *at all.* Who knew that eating healthier is a lot more expensive than not? Izuku did from his experience of being, well, homeless, but he never imagined the gap would be this large.

And Izuku feels bad, he really does. He doesn’t like lying to the man, per se, but it’s not like he can just walk up to him and say *sorry, All Might, I’m extraordinarily broke and can’t afford the very basic meal plan you want me to follow, which will probably ruin what we have going on here and make you stop teaching me, but I’m still willing to work myself to the bone to continue training with you if that’s alright.*

No. That wouldn’t be very plus ultra.

“Privileged,” Ms. Hanako mutters sourly a few yards away.

Izuku squints at her. “Huh?”

“That man just doesn’t understand that not everyone can eat like he does.” She gestures aggressively with the knife to the dietary book Izuku brought with him, shaking her head. “And besides, you’re already quite fit for your age and stature. Your metabolism burns through most foods, does it not? It’s not like eating more protein every day will change anything unless you're eating a bucketful of it, which is just insane to expect from a young boy.”

That’s true. The only reason he is fairly built—besides his vigilante activities, of course—is because *Boost* gives him an enhanced metabolism. He barely eats enough as it is, but what he does eat gets turned into whatever nutrients he needs incredibly fast. Besides raw ramen, cold coffee, and breadsticks, Izuku lives off the prepackaged food that sits on the clearance shelves of the nearby supermarkets. Sometimes he's able to have fruits and vegetables when they're on major sale, but more often than not he's getting his major nutrients from a can. His body cries for better sustenance, but Izuku can’t provide it.

I need to save up for a mini stove heater. I don’t want to have to steal one.

Izuku continues practicing the steps for the meal she told him to try, frowning slightly. “It’s not his fault. And I wouldn’t call him privileged, really. He works hard for his money.”

“Of course he does. That was bad phrasing on my part, sugar. I’d say he’s just rather ignorant, then.”

“Well, he’s nice, though.” Izuku thinks about how happy the man gets when he witnesses the boy achieving something new, and how he encourages him even when Izuku is stubborn.

It’s only been a little over a week of training with All Might, and Izuku can already feel the difference, both in his physical features and mental state.

All Might is nice to be around, which is wrong. He *shouldn’t* be. He very much should not be.

Izuku shouldn’t even be around him. His very presence is dangerous to All Might. His quirk alone is reason enough to be wary. The boy feels he’s betraying the hero by even being near him. He doesn’t know what Izuku is, or what he can do with his powers. He wouldn’t be training

him if he did, surely.

“Oh, I guess not," Ms. Hanako concedes. "I’m sure he's a humble person, but he could at least try to be more open with you. I swear, if he wasn't a hero, somebody would've called the cops on him already.”

Izuku only laughs quietly, now feeling torn. It would be nice if All Might was more open about One for All and why he’s choosing to train him. Izuku is still, at the bottom of all this, suspicious about everything. *I’m a nobody. Why did he choose me and not someone else? Isn’t he just wasting his time? I have nothing to give back to him, so it’s not like he’s gaining anything from this. I already told him I'm not becoming a hero, so why does he continue to train me?*

But he's being hypocritical, isn't he? The man owes him nothing. Izuku shouldn’t be upset when he’s *also* keeping his real quirk a secret. He's arguably doing much worse things, too, so who's really to blame?

“Which reminds me!" Ms. Hanako’s voice becomes sharp, and she turns to him with narrowed eyes. “You haven’t been to my house in a long time, boy! You know how many baked goods I’ve had to throw away because you weren’t there to eat them with me?”

Oh, shit.

The woman continues dramatically, gesturing wildly with one hand. “I’m just an old lady, Izuku, I can’t finish an entire pie by myself. You know my daughter won’t eat them with me either anymore. Something about trying to maintain her physique or whatever.”

“Ah, I’m sorry!” He dips his head, his skin heating up. It has been a while since he’s last visited her outside of the restaurant. “I keep forgetting!”

“I don’t wanna hear excuses or nothing. Just make sure to come over when you can, hon, I’m getting lonely all by myself.”

Before Izuku can promise that he will, that he’ll eat all the pies she makes with him and even more, the bell near the front door rings, signaling someone coming in.

“Ah, that must be Ayaka.” Ms. Hanako leaves the back kitchen to greet her daughter, briefly telling Izuku to take a break.

The boy does so with a bit of hesitancy, glancing at the open book laid out on the sidebar. There’s a bunch of pages that All Might printed of

various meals, drinks, and even shakes that he's supposed to start adding to his daily routine. Most of them are crossed out in red sharpie by Ms. Hanako and replaced with cheaper, easier meals that hold the same amount of nutritional value.

Most of the foods Izuku can get for just a few bills—older vegetables, reduced canned foods, and fruit that nobody buys this time of year. It's still a lot more than he can really afford, but Izuku can try.

Between Tony's Pizzeria and Auntie Mitsuki's house, he's going to try and eat more. Eat *healthier,* more specifically.

He may not need to lose weight, but he needs to build more muscle. Even with *Boost,* building muscle is hard.

But he has to keep it up. This isn't something that he can do off and on when he has the extra money, he has to put in the effort. He owes All Might that much.

Again, he really has to save up for some household items. Like a mini stove heater, for one, preferably battery operated or solar-powered since he doesn't have a lot of electricity. The generator he made only goes so far—it allows him light and some outlets to plug his tech in to charge, not so much anything else.

He needs a phone. The one he has now is used for both his vigilante persona and himself. He isn't comfortable with All Might having Rabbit's phone number, even if the man doesn't know that he does. He's gonna have to play it off like *I got a new number, you can lose the last one!*

He's okay with Kacchan and Auntie having it, Kacchan for obvious reasons and Auntie only because she doesn't have a reason to connect him to Rabbit. But anyone else is a big no-no.

"Oh, hey Izuku," Ayaka greets, shutting the kitchen door behind her as she slips on an apron. "Ya here to help us today?"

When Izuku can't go on patrol or when he has nothing else to do, he helps Ms. Hanako and her family at the Pizzeria. Being a family-owned restaurant is hard, so Izuku is glad to help. So now, saying as it opens in less than thirty minutes, Kayaka is probably assuming he's here for that.

Which, since it's a weekend, he *is* free. He only trains with All Might during weekdays. A fact that Izuku is very happy about; sometimes he

likes to get in an early patrol before the sun comes out to catch the criminals off guard.

“Um, actually, yeah.” Izuku closes the book and starts to clean up his area, tying back his hair. “If you’re okay with it, that is.”

“Of course! I haven’t seen you in a while, kiddo, so it’s always nice to have you here.”

Again. He doesn’t deserve the kindness this family gives him.

Izuku washes his hands and picks up the dough Ms. Hanako had been working on, spreading it out even more to get it to the correct thickness.

Now *this* is something he knows how to do. Which is kind of weird, seeing as Italian cooking is actually a little harder to do than Japanese cooking—at least according to Ms. Hanako. He doesn’t know how to perfect basic cooking techniques, and yet he can cook and even bake sometimes. Both Auntie and Ms. Hanako have said he does it pretty well, too, he just doesn’t do it the correct way.

What the correct way is, he doesn’t know. All Izuku cares about in cooking is if his food is at least a step above garbage and a little bit edible by the end of it.

“So where’s Ouki?” Izuku asks, hoping he sounds polite and not demanding.

“Dad has to run a few errands today, so he can’t come in.” Ayaka doesn’t turn away from stirring the tomato sauce. “And he’s just not feeling it, y’know? He’s been getting depressed since the business has been going down.”

Izuku frowns a little, taking the sauce she slides him and spreading it over the dough. “No one’s coming in anymore?”

“You know how it is, being a pizzeria in Japan. Nobody really wants to eat here after they’ve gone here once.”

And Izuku does get it. Ms. Hanako complains about it a lot. That’s why she works all the time—they can’t afford to close it down for even one day.

“Hm.” Izuku looks at the board on the wall, taking note of the menu. The three meat pizza is the most popular, he knows that much. Better

start making that first. “Well, I think the food you guys make is amazing, so they’re missing out.”

A short laugh. Ayaka pats him on the shoulder as she squeezes past him to get to the sinks. “You know, maybe you should start working here. Mom says you help a lot, even when you’re not cooking.”

Izuku has thought about it before. He pushed that idea away very quickly, though, as *working* means getting *paid.* And Ms. Hanako and the rest of the family barely get enough money to keep it open. She definitely won’t have enough to pay him a salary. Izuku doesn’t want to do that to her, even if it would really help him.

And besides, he isn’t *always* free to do stuff like this. His vigilante work calls for his attention at random times, not just at night or in the early mornings.

“Maybe,” Izuku says, finishing up with the first pizza and moving on to the next. “Hey, where did Ms. Hanako go?”

“She’s cleaning up the front. We’ve got about, what, twenty minutes before opening?”

He glances at a clock above the door. “Yep. What’s the special today?”

Ayaka stops what she’s doing and turns to him with a wide grin. “Ever heard of Italian cream cakes?”

Oh, *yes.*

Izuku likes sitting on roofs.

Call it a hobby, call it a drug, hell, call it a *fetish,* Izuku just likes being up high.

Not too high, though. He does not want to remember the helicopter incident right now, thank you.

He just finished preparing the food with Ayaka and saying his goodbyes, and now he's sitting on the ledge of the restaurant with his notebook in hand and earbuds in.

He has to update his journal on his quirks. Even after a week, he hasn't done it yet.

Pull.

It's a dumb name for an even dumber quirk, but it's helpful. It's just the memories attached with it that Izuku doesn't like. But again, it practically saved his life when he got shot, so he can't hate it too much.

See, before that incident, he assumed that *Pull,* well, *pulled* things to his body when he raised one of his hands. And in a sense, he's still right.

But rather than the actual magnetic part being his chest or stomach, it's his hands themselves that serve as where the objects head.

To put it simply, the objects will head towards his hands and not his chest. So when he had to pull out the fragments of the hollow point bullet that night, things proved to be a little easier than he expected it to be.

He thought that *Pull* wouldn't be useful, as the pieces were already *in* him and therefore wouldn't move anywhere, but he was fortunately wrong.

His palms are the magnets, not the center of his body. So when he positioned a hand to face the bullet wound entrance, he was gobsmacked to see all of the pieces flying out, meaning *Pull* worked.

So gobsmacked, in fact, that the white-hot pain of his flesh being torn almost didn't register.

Almost.

It's safe to say that being shot at the warehouse had its pros and cons. The pros being that he now knows about another aspect of his quirk and has even more uses for it, and the cons being that it hurt like a *son of a bitch* and left a large scar on his abdomen.

Not fun at all, no. And it's not cool when you can't really show it off. People tend to get a little concerned when teenagers such as himself

start to show off *bullet wounds.*

Izuku is used to scars. No one else seems to be.

And so he writes those findings in his notebook, crossing out his previous theories and expanding on what he knows now. He even makes a small sketch of his hands versus his body, showing that his palms are the magnets.

A cop walks by from below, and Izuku hastily scrambles back so he's not swinging his legs off the side. He's already gotten reprimanded for his rooftop sitting before, even though it's not technically illegal since Ms. Hanako allows him to on the restaurant. And the building is only one story tall, so it's not like anyone can mistake him for a jumper.

Eh. Better safe than sorry.

Tomorrow's Monday, so that means he starts up his training again. Six o'clock in the morning, every weekday. It's a nice schedule, saying as Izuku never sleeps anyway.

He can't wait for what All Might has planned this week.

"Did you know that it takes longer to drown in saltwater than it does in freshwater? It can take anywhere between five to thirty minutes, while drowning in freshwater takes anywhere between five to twenty minutes."

"I did not know that, my boy!"

All Might sounds confused, if a little intrigued. Izuku counts that as a sign to continue.

"And so, theoretically, if I walked straight into the ocean right there and swam out, face down, for as long as I could, I should float pretty far out before finally dying. I think that calls for an experiment, don't you think? I'm curious."

"That doesn't sound so theoretical, Young Midoriya. I must ask that

you please *step away from the water—"*

All Might picks Izuku up easily by his shirt before he can submerge himself into the ocean, and he carries him like a limp rag doll over to the pile of garbage he'd previously been at. The pile of garbage where he's *supposed* to be dragging a fridge from.

The boy groans as he's carefully dropped onto the pile. "Come on, All Might, anything is more fun than doing this! This is boring."

"Drowning is more fun than training to become stronger?" The man beams at him, hands on his hips in another blinding pose. "I thought you said you wanted to clean this beach up, my boy!"

"Well, yeah, but it's going to take forever without using my quirk!"

All Might doesn't sympathize with him for a second. "I won't allow you to use your quirk for this because that will simply defeat the purpose. First you must get your body strong, and then your mind. Your quirk will be next!"

Why is he making me do this. This is not what I had in mind. Someone run me over.

At least it's something for Izuku to do in the mornings besides stare at the ceiling and contemplate life or create yet another plan to terrorize Tsukauchi. That gets boring pretty quick.

He'd rather be here than be lonely.

"Here, my boy! I'll make this a bit easier for you!" All Might grabs an edge of the fridge and, with one effortless shove, tears it out of the depths of the pile. It falls with a loud thud to the ground, now free from its restraints, and the hero grins at Izuku. "Now you can pull it to the garbage bin!"

Izuku just stands there, briefly wishing that he could've been under the fridge when it fell. All Might made it look so easy, and Izuku had been struggling for at least half an hour trying to dig it out.

In his defense, his wound is still a little bit sore. It's healed over pretty much completely now, leaving behind a deep scar about the size of a golf ball on his abdomen, like he's said before. The scarred tissue won't ever go away.

But hey, that was his first time getting shot with a hollow point. He

can add that one to the list of his growing scars.

Izuku stares at the large refrigerator. “Just to reiterate, you want me to move that without my quirk?”

“Yes, my boy! I want to see how you do!”

Car, Izuku thinks, but make it crash. He wants All Might to pick up the fridge again and let it land on him. That sounds a little more tempting with each passing second.

Speaking of All Might, the hero jumps up and lands on top of the fridge, throwing Izuku some ropes to wrap around it. “Well, get to it, my boy! It’s not going to move itself!”

“This isn’t fair,” Izuku gapes, glaring at him. “You’re like half a ton by yourself, and you’re sitting on it!”

“I have to say that I’m enjoying the view, Young Midoriya. You haven’t looked so beaten down since I made you push that car the other day!”

Izuku flushes as the hero takes out his phone and snaps a few pictures. “It didn’t have any tires. It was harder than it looked.” An idea suddenly forms in his head. A dumb, probably shitty idea, but an idea nonetheless. “I bet *you* can’t move this without using your quirk, All Might.”

It’s a tease just as much as it is a challenge. The hero stands to his full height on top of the fridge and does another pose, causing Izuku to have to physically look away due to the amount of light he emits.

“Just watch, Young Midoriya! I will show you how strong you must become!” And then he slides off, grips the bottom of the fridge with both hands, and *throws* it up into the air. Izuku can’t help but let out a gasp as the man jumps up a little and kicks it all the way across the sand so it lands right in the dumpster.

Izuku lets himself admire the man for a second—that’s just his physical prowess, he didn’t even use One for All—before turning smug. “Well, now I don’t have to move it, right?”

The boy sees the exact moment All Might realizes what he’s done, as he seems to glitch in place, blinking in surprise. And then he straightens up, grinning sharply. “I’m glad you did that, my boy! I was fearing it was getting to be too easy for you! Why don’t you move on

to that other fridge over there?"

He points, and Izuku follows his gaze, only for his jaw to drop to the floor. This freezer looks *twice* the size of the last one, and it looks like there's a bunch of garbage stuffed inside it. It may not be buried underneath a ton of trash like the last one was, but it looks to be even harder to move simply because of its size and weight.

Izuku pouts and trudges over, trying to mentally hype himself up. They've been out here for a few hours now, and he's tired, so sue him.

"Head up, young man! This training will make you even stronger!"

And for what? I'm too tired from Rabbit as it is, and then I gotta do this every morning. I mean, it's technically my fault, but still.

"You really do need to quit that mumbling."

Izuku jumps, not having heard All Might power down into his smaller form. The boy sighs and starts to wrap the rope around his newest target. He's gonna be here all day, as he knows All Might won't let him leave unless he moves it at least a little bit.

On Mondays and Thursdays they work on heavy lifting, which is what Izuku is doing right now. They take breaks on weekends, and everything in between is something cruel that All Might plans for him on the spot. That's the plan, their schedule.

Izuku likes knowing things. He likes the stability.

The boy would be lying if he said he doesn't get a bit of a thrill by training with the hero. He's gradually getting a little stronger, and besides, he isn't bad company.

He just doesn't know why this is happening. Izuku has a feeling the man doesn't know himself. All Might must have some ulterior motives, some *ambitions,* but Izuku can't think of any. It's like there's nothing there. He has an idea, but—no. Of course not. The number one hero would *never* choose him.

Izuku knows that All Might's quirk can be passed down, but there's no way the man is thinking of him as a potential user. He probably has someone in mind already. Someone stronger, more obedient, maybe someone who can move a fridge with ease even without special powers.

Is that a little unfair to say? Maybe. It's not right to get bitter, especially when Izuku *knows* why something like that can't happen, even if All Might wishes it so.

It's better that way, anyways. For *everyone* involved.

It's exactly eleven days after the Endeavor incident when he gets the text.

He's taking a short break from All Might's training, just laying on the ground with his shirt over his face to protect him from the light, when his phone buzzes in his pocket.

The glare from the morning sun is bright, and Izuku turns his back towards it so he can read the screen.

Meet me at this address tomorrow at ten.

It's the number that trips him up, not so much the text. He knows who this is, he's just surprised that the man is even texting him at all.

Now, his first thought is *wow, he unblocked me.* And his second thought is *oh fuck, he unblocked me.*

Because this sounds like another trap. Does Eraserhead think he's stupid? Izuku is genuinely curious now.

He glances quickly at All Might, who is busy setting up a small area on the sand for them to spar. Sand will make it harder to fight, and Izuku has a feeling that that's the point.

When Izuku will ever have to fight a villain on the beach, or someone with a sand quirk, the boy doesn't know, but it doesn't hurt to be careful, he guesses.

Confident that All Might won't walk up behind him, Izuku texts back with hesitant fingers.

Ooh, a date night? Are you bringing some of your super secret cop buddies?

What he means is *do it, I dare you.*

He doesn't like how Eraserhead is deciding to text him now, out of the blue. Why not earlier? Why not never?

Tsukauchi has been texting Rabbit a lot this past week. He'd blown up Izuku's phone the night of the whole Endeavor escapade, asking if he was hurt.

Kind of endearing, if Izuku is being honest, but that thought didn't stop him from being annoyed at the detective. Tsukauchi claimed he didn't know about Eraserhead's plan until after it all happened, but Izuku is too pissed to decide whether or not to believe him yet.

Again, he can't be angry. Doesn't have the right to be. He's a criminal, a vigilante. Most people believe that vigilantes are worse than villains simply *because* they think they can get away with their wrongdoings. They apparently believe they're above the law, same as criminals.

Izuku knows he's not. Knows that he really is a villain—in more ways than one—and deserves to be treated as such. And yet he can't help but feel a bit betrayed.

Detective Tsukauchi was the first one on Rabbit's case when the vigilante first appeared. Izuku had run into him quite a few times in the beginning, if only to ask him questions about his quirk and how it works. He received no such answers then, of course, but Izuku wasn't discouraged. He isn't dumb, he knows the very basic rule of not telling the enemy your secrets—which is why he'd been especially surprised when Eraserhead answered his questions that night after saving that woman.

Though in the hero's defense, Izuku wasn't Rabbit then. He was just a scrawny little kid who helped out a bit with a domestic violence case. And maybe he also stole some files from the police, but hey, they should've considered that his repayment.

But back to the point—it's taken a while for Izuku to trust Tsukauchi. The detective has never sent any heroes after him, not directly, and he's never done anything that Izuku sees as threatening towards him. It's as if, dare he say, that the detective has *let* him go a few times.

All of that is changing, it seems. Even if Tsukauchi didn't know of his colleague's little trap, he was probably still in contact with him. He

was still sharing his notes and probably spilling Rabbit's secrets. So, by default, he must've known that Eraserhead was planning something.

Tsukauchi probably talked with him about it, too, which makes this all worse.

Izuku's grace period is running out. He's going to have to meet up with Eraserhead if he wants any hope of figuring out how to deal with all of this.

So much has happened in the span of less than a month—he met Eraserhead as just Midoriya Izuku, had some trouble with the sludge villain, met All Might, then *Small* Might, and even met Present Mic.

Oh, and he was also shot by a hollow point bullet. Not a very good experience. Would give it zero stars if he could. Would not recommend.

Tsukauchi, in a sense, cares. At least artificially so. He's shown that he cares. He doesn't just text him now to tell him to turn himself in—though he still does that on occasion, and Izuku never fails in sending him another weird hero meme to get him to fuck off. He texts Rabbit and asks if he's okay, if he's hurt or needs backup or anything, as he promised he'd surely get that help if he requested it, like how Izuku had asked during the warehouse incident.

The detective has the right to text him. Izuku trusts him, maybe not fully, of course, since he still works for the police and wants him to turn himself over, but enough. Eraserhead, on the other hand, does *not* have the right to text him something like that. For the underground hero to just suddenly up and tell him to meet him on some rooftop at ten at night, *with* the knowledge of how undesirably their last meeting ended—it doesn't sit right with the boy.

Maybe he'd waited for Izuku to cool off before texting, as dumb as that sounds, or maybe it's something else.

No. I'm not bringing anyone. This is just a talk.

The reply comes instantly, which is a little surprising. And what does he mean by just a talk? Like the first conversation they had after the warehouse incident? Where the talk was more of a *do this or else* sort of thing?

But that can't be right. Eraserhead promised to help him. Surely he

won’t make another threat.

Eraserhead is level-headed. He specializes in manipulation and espionage, so he might be planning something. Izuku has to be careful, as much as he wants to believe him. As much as he *wants* to build up that trust like the man was saying.

He is still Izuku’s idol. Their relationship as criminal and hero won’t change that. Izuku will make sure it doesn’t.

The boy leaves him on read. He fears no god.

He’ll have to ask Tsukauchi if he can trust the tired hobo man. Only *then* will he seriously consider the offer.

Kacchan won’t like it, Izuku knows that much. He’ll probably laugh in his face and suggest drop kicking the hero—which Izuku already has, much to his friend’s amusement and the boy’s own mortification.

He did it to escape, sure, but it still makes Izuku feel a little bad.

Hopefully he won’t have to do it again anytime soon.

“My boy, are you ready!” All Might calls to him from inside the makeshift box. “I think we should work on defensive strategies today, what do you say?”

Izuku is already jumping up and running over, leaving his phone sitting on his discarded over-shirt as his energy comes back full force.

Now that, he thinks, sounds like a good distraction.

Chapter End Notes

u

beginning thread

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I told you before that you can’t just do something like that, Aizawa! He’ll get spooked!”

“Spooked? What is he, a dog?"

Hizashi watches the scene unfold in front of him with wide eyes. His husband has dragged him to the police station for some unspoken reason, and the more of the argument Hizashi is beginning to hear, the more he’s starting to think that he’s only here as a witness so Tsukauchi doesn’t end up flaying Shouta alive.

Because *boy* does the detective look pissed.

“You can’t just text him some ominous message and expect him to meet you somewhere in the middle of the night! That just *screams* danger!”

Shouta glares at the detective, not budging an inch from where he’s sitting, arms crossed, at the large oval table in the conference room. The holographic whiteboard is lit up in front of them, not showing anything at this particular moment.

The underground hero rolls his eyes. “I don’t know what else you expected me to do. I told the kid it’s just a talk, and it *is.* I’m not going to capture him.”

“You wouldn’t be able to even if you tried,” Tsukauchi says, and if Hizashi didn’t know better, he’d say the detective looks almost *proud.*

Oh, shit, it’s getting real in here.

Shouta throws a hand up in the air. “Really? Whose side are you on?”

“I’m on the *right* side.”

Now Hizashi can’t help but snort at that, earning himself a cutting look from his husband and an amused glance from Tsukauchi. Hizashi is enjoying himself now, not at all mad at Shouta anymore for tearing him away from his favorite show. If he gets to sit here and listen to

this frankly hilarious convo going on, Hizashi can perhaps forgive him.

“You wanted me to get close to him,” Shouta says, pinching the bridge of his nose, “so that’s what I’m going to do.”

“That’s not how he sees it. He *texted* me, you know! He still doesn’t know whether or not he can trust you after what you’ve done to him.”

Okay, I’m lost. What the hell are they talking about now.

“How is that my fault? I only did what you wanted me to.”

Tsukauchi looks scandalized. “You set up a trap for him like he’s some kind of rodent! That’s not what I meant when I told you to get him to trust you and then *peacefully* convince him to turn himself in.”

Rodent. Hizashi hums thoughtfully. “I mean, rabbits are small animals, so that wasn’t a farfetched idea.”

And now *both* hero and detective whip around to glare at him. “Not helping,” Shouta grumbles, shaking his head.

Hizashi just smirks as his husband continues. *He’s cute when he argues.*

“And I *tried,* Tsukauchi. I only set him up so I could get the chance to talk to him. You *know* how fast he is. I tried to get him to believe me, and it just didn’t work.”

The detective doesn’t look convinced. “Can’t imagine why.”

Oop. Hizashi wants popcorn for this comedy. He has a feeling it’s going to turn into a tragedy soon.

“Tsukauchi,” Shouta sighs.

“Aizawa.”

“Look, I *know* I fucked up. I know.” The underground hero swipes a hand down his face before sitting up to touch the whiteboard. “I could’ve been nicer when I talked to him after the warehouse fiasco. I scared him off, and now I have to make up for it.”

Images and news articles pop up on the screen, all revolving around a certain green vigilante. Hizashi leans forward and peers at a few of them; he’s only read a few of the ones from when his husband showed him Rabbit’s file that one day, so most of these are new to him.

The kid is apparently young, and he's managed to escape a ton of heroes before, so he must be relatively smart. Hizashi thinks flippantly that he'd make a good hero under different circumstances.

"I'll meet with him tonight. See how it goes. We'll work from there."

"Fine," Tsukauchi finally relents after a long pause. "I trust you won't make this worse again."

And then they leave, just like that, Hizashi giving the detective finger guns as a goodbye before his husband can drag him out completely into the hallway.

The blond doesn't hesitate to pull him in for a kiss once the door closes behind them, never one to pass up a chance to see Shouta flush.

"Hizashi," the man says in warning, pushing him away. His eyes dart around the police station, probably to see if anyone saw.

The voice hero ignores him and starts the walk to the car. "So, want me to come with ya for this *talk,* just in case?"

He means to keep watch. Maybe to act as backup in case things take a turn for the worse.

Shouta must see where his line of thinking is. "No. Rabbit will know you're there, as he always seems to when I try and tail him. I need him to trust me, and bringing you will do the exact *opposite."*

Hizashi hums, taking out his set of keys. "What're you gonna do? I don't think talking about the weather is gonna do ya much good."

"I'm gonna let him know that we're on his side. We won't actively try and capture him anymore."

That's unsurprising. It's obvious to Hizashi just in the way his husband talks about the vigilante that he cares for him. The voice hero expected this sooner or later.

"You're such a softie," Hizashi coos as they get in the car. "He's grown on ya, hasn't he? Even in such a short amount of time."

"Shut up."

Hizashi leans over to give him a quick peck on the nose, and this time his husband doesn't pull away.

It's their day off today, and they've decided to go out for a quick breakfast outing, seeing as they didn't have a chance to eat anything this morning. The couple unfortunately never gets to spend quality time together very often. Between Hizashi's three jobs and Shouta's nightly patrols, they have no time to just *be* together. But that's alright, they both knew that that's how it would be before they even got together.

Doesn't mean they can't complain about it, though.

Hizashi lets his mind wander as he drives, humming a tune in time with the song playing on the radio. Now that he's thinking, he needs to do the laundry again. It's been a couple weeks, and both heroes are starting to run out of clothes—Shouta especially, which is *really* telling. The man only wears one outfit the entire week, just a plain black shirt and pants that double as his hero costume, much to Hizashi's distaste.

To be fair, it's not *really* Hizashi's fault that he broke their washer machine. He doesn't even know how it happened, it just did. Now Shouta has been making him go to the laundromat and wash their clothes until they can get a new one.

It'll probably be another couple months before that happens. While money isn't exactly tight, saying as they have five jobs between them, they can't just afford to up and buy a whole new washer machine.

But maybe it's not all bad. He might get to see that green-haired kid again.

The boy's quirky, no pun intended. He shares Hizashi's same dry humor and music, so that's a win in his book. He wouldn't mind talking to him again.

Hell, he needs to actually ask his name so he doesn't keep calling him *the kid* in his head.

"What are you thinking about?"

Shouta is still looking out the window as he speaks, a foot kicked up on the dash. He does that solely because he *knows* that it annoys Hizashi. And Hizashi knows that his husband knows that *he* knows why he does it.

It doesn't exactly make sense, which honestly sums up the entirety of their relationship.

“You know that kid I was telling you about? The one I walked in on getting beat up in that alley?”

Shouta props up another foot on the dash, ignoring Hizashi’s side eye. “The same one you saw at the laundromat?”

“Yep. He’s making me worry a bit. There’s just something about him that I can’t put my finger on.” Hizashi flicks on a blinker to turn into the diner’s plaza. “Hopefully I’ll see him when I do the laundry again.”

“Hopefully not, you mean. He shouldn’t be out that late, ‘Zashi. That usually means something’s wrong.”

Hizashi rolls his eyes at him. “We were both exactly the same around that age, don’t try to act all angelic now. And besides, it’s not like curfew is a big deal.”

“You’re supposed to enforce the law, not encourage people to break it.” Shouta grins suddenly. “It seems we’ve both got delinquents now. It’s time for you to feel my pain.”

The voice hero can’t help but laugh, as he didn’t think of it like that before now. “Well, I don’t think mine is *nearly* as bad as your two. One of yours is an actual vigilante, Sho.”

“And the other one is going to put Tsukauchi into an early grave.” Shouta thunks his head against the headrest multiple times, groaning. “I have a feeling I’m gonna see more of him, too. Tsukauchi said he’s been too quiet recently.”

“Ah, so he’s the *calm before the storm* type, huh?” Hizashi ducks away from his husband’s hand with a cackle.

They pull into the parking lot and go in to hopefully enjoy some food. It’ll be a good time to relax, especially when Shouta has to have that meeting with Rabbit tonight. Everyone is high strung nowadays.

But even while eating his soup, he can’t get what Shouta said out of his mind. Hizashi wants to see the kid even more now.

They’re both probably being paranoid, he muses to himself. The kid is most likely fine.

“That usually means something’s wrong.”

And if he’s not, well, Hizashi will get to the bottom of it himself.

Midoriya Izuku is, to put it simply, weird. He's *interesting.* At least to Toshinori.

The boy has an edge of *unknown* about him. An edge to his smile and a dark light in his eyes that reminds Toshinori of villains he's faced before.

"I studied your moves and appearances and made the connection."

Toshinori shivers as he remembers what the boy said to him on that roof. There's just *no way* the kid already knew. He said that he hadn't been sure about his other form, that it had only been a theory, and yet he didn't seem surprised in the slightest when Toshinori unexpectedly deflated.

Though in all fairness he barely reacts to anything as it is, which is mildly disconcerting but not quite to the point of making Toshinori uncomfortable.

It doesn't make sense. Does he have a mind reading quirk? Maybe an analysis quirk? But that can't be right. He has increased strength and speed, and that fact is backed up by his paperwork, so it must be true. That's the power listed under his quirk category—*Boost,* he calls it. Just another normal enhancement. Nothing about increased intelligence or a mental power.

Toshinori only knows this because he asked Tsukauchi to run Midoriya's name for him. Not out of suspicion, but just because he wanted to know more about his potential successor—ahem, his *trainee.*

He hadn't been expecting much, so imagine his surprise when he heard that his friend already *knows* the boy. Very well, in fact. He was even more surprised to hear that his *trainee* is a bit of a troublemaker.

Midoriya has quite a few charges under his belt, that being multiples cases of public quirk usage, assault, and interference with police and hero work. Nothing *too* special, as Tsukauchi was adamant about the

fact that the boy is not, in fact, a criminal or something of the likes.

According to his friend, Midoriya is very passionate about doing good and maintaining an open personality, and he even went as far as to vouch for the kid.

The green-haired boy is respectful to him, if not a little snarky sometimes, but that's okay. The sass keeps Toshinori on his toes. It kind of reminds him of himself when he was younger.

The point is that he's never done anything that Toshinori would classify as *villainous* or *dangerous.*

Which is good, however low that's setting the bar in regards to finding a good successor. Midoriya's character seems honest. He looks like someone Toshinori would want on his side during a battle—and the kid is only fourteen! Had just turned fourteen a couple months ago, in fact. His record says so.

The hero feels a little bad that he missed it, but there's nothing he can do about it now.

Midoriya doesn't seem to have a bad bone in his body, and yet he still manages to set Toshinori on edge sometimes.

Not out of fear, exactly. More out of, well, anticipation. For what, he doesn't know.

The boy is bright and cheerful most days, but in those moments where he's really focusing on a task that Toshinori gave him, he looks different; controlled, determined, a bit perturbed.

He looks almost, as silly as it sounds, like a robot. Like a machine that's been programmed to do everything efficiently and to the upmost standards.

Or maybe the boy is just a perfectionist and Toshinori is looking into things that aren't there.

A part of him can't help but compare Midoriya with his own rival. The boy reminds him of Endeavor's menacing personality, the way the number two hero faces his opponents with an air of malice and animalistic power before completely and utterly destroying everything in his way.

Midoriya has a similar intellect, a similar off-putting aura, but there's

an obvious edge to Endeavor's. You know his character just by looking at his face, and that's if the flames hadn't already clued you in.

The boy is more like a mine, hidden from sight until you've already stepped on it. Hidden beneath a sharp smile and slightly feral demeanor that goes against everything Tsukauchi told Toshinori about him—about his comedic personality and the immature-yet-responsible way he carries himself, how he's quiet and reserved when you first meet him, and how quickly the nervousness disappears once he gets used to you.

So Toshinori doesn't mind the sass at all, not if it means that the boy is starting to feel comfortable around him. He doesn't miss the way Midoriya tenses up when he goes in for a pat on the shoulder, or even when he gets a little closer to the boy without warning him first.

That's only natural for a teenager, Toshinori supposes. It should go away soon.

But Midoriya also has *bruises* on his body, bruises that Toshinori knows *damn well* he doesn't get from training with him. He isn't blind, nor is he stupid. He may not be the brightest hero there is, but he can recognize warning signs when he sees them.

The teen doesn't answer any of his questions when he asks about them. He also never seems to take off his shirt. Sure, he discards his top whenever he gets a little too sweaty, especially when he's out on the beach, but he always has an undershirt on. Like the day before, when they sparred together. The boy had that black gym shirt on.

Which is fine. If the boy isn't comfortable showing skin, that's okay. It's not like that matters. Toshinori wouldn't have cared about it had the boy not been covered in very worrying bruises everywhere else. But whatever, he won't push him, at least for now. Because something doesn't *feel* right.

And if Midoriya really is like a mine, that means the danger will start to explode into existence once someone sets him off.

Toshinori doesn't know what danger Midoriya possesses. What he could possibly do if given the chance or permission, and he isn't too keen on finding out at the moment.

He still doesn't know why he's taken an interest in the boy. Maybe it's because of his guilt for saying all of those things to him on their first meeting, or maybe because of his growing sense of urgency due to the

fact that Toshinori is getting *old* and he hasn't picked a successor yet.

But Midoriya says he doesn't want to be a hero. At least, he isn't exactly sure yet.

So why is Toshinori still drawn to him? Why is he willing to waste precious time on a boy who probably wouldn't even accept his quirk if he asked—

Waste. Toshinori frowns to himself as he watches said boy run around the park to increase his stamina. He's sitting on a bench off to the side, just making sure the kid doesn't pass out.

He's not *wasting* his time. Not at all. He enjoys training with Midoriya. He truly does. More so than he imagined he would when he first suggested it. He finds that watching the boy work and train and *grow stronger* makes him happy. Happier than he's been in a long time.

It's only been a couple weeks now, but even Tsukauchi is noticing his friend's change. He never stops teasing the hero about it every time he stops by the police station.

Toshinori can only pretend he's annoyed by it.

"The question is for a friend of mine."

Midoriya has never talked about his friends before. It wasn't concerning at first. The boy is busy training, so there really is no reason for him to bring up his personal life.

But now that they're into this, now that Toshinori is getting invested, he wants to know more about him.

He wants to know if the question was really just *for a friend.*

The feeling is slight, but Toshinori is starting to think that the boy lied to him about that part. It wouldn't make sense, though, as his quirk is just minor enhancements. There would be no reason for *anyone* to think that he's a villain.

But the more time he spends around the boy, the more he thinks about it. The more he realizes that he can't judge the kid without knowing him, despite his growing suspicions.

He plans to get closer to the boy. Even *if* he won't end up becoming his successor. He's too smart and powerful for Toshinori to let slip

through the cracks. And who knows, maybe he can eventually convince him to be a hero. Maybe.

It's weird, is the thing. The kid is like a *magnet.* There's something about him, something about his aura, that makes Toshinori drawn to him. But One for All *screams* at him whenever he gets close, or whenever he so much as thinks about him. Toshinori can't tell if it's a good or bad thing. He's leaning more towards good.

God, he *hopes* it's good.

Gran Torino would have his ass if he found out about this. His former mentor would most definitely whack him upside the head for being this ignorant and secretive about the new training.

Toshinori doesn't want to tell the retired hero about this. Maybe because he's afraid of what he'll say—that he'll tell Toshinori what a bad idea this is, or how dumb of a choice Midoriya is for his quirk.

He doesn't think he can handle any more negative comments. His mind already does enough of that as it is. He knows that this is probably a bad idea. He *knows,* damnit.

And yet he just can't bring himself to push the boy away.

He shakes himself away from those thoughts. He has a duty to train Midoriya now, even if he doesn't want to be a hero. Toshinori suggested it, so he's going to keep his word.

"Alright, my boy!" He calls out, inflating into his bigger form. "You can use your quirk now!"

The happy gasp he gets in return gets rid of all his qualms.

"Your costume is dumb."

Izuku turns on his friend, pointing the needle at him threateningly.

“Your face is dumb.”

“You look like a wannabe All Might, nerd.”

“Literally *how?* It looks nothing like him! And besides, you helped me design this, so doesn’t that make *you* dumb?”

“Tch, whatever.” Kacchan leans back on his bed with his hands behind his head, eyes narrowed into slits as he watches Izuku work. “It looks dumb on *you.* It wouldn’t on me.”

Izuku huffs, threading the string expertly through the bullet hole on the costume. “Out of the two people in this room, who is A) being useless, and B) the one that makes little kids cry just by looking at them?”

Kacchan just snorts, lapsing into an annoyed silence.

Huh, that’s weird. He usually would’ve jumped me by now.

Izuku snips off the excess thread and looks at his newly stitched up Rabbit costume. The dark green is still there, along with the red outlines that frame the fabric and make it look sharper, but now the multitude of tears that’s been gathering on the costume has disappeared. The bullet hole has been fixed, along with all the other scrapes.

It looks, in Izuku’s opinion, *amazing.* He knows Kacchan thinks the same, or else the boy wouldn’t have made such a big deal about it apparently being *dumb.*

It’s reverse psychology. Izuku is well-versed in his friend’s language after all these years of knowing him.

Izuku is proud of his suit. It looks new, and he can’t wait to put it on tonight to show it off. He has to make a new appearance for himself, *especially* since he’s decided to go to that meeting with Eraserhead.

This meeting is going to be important, he can feel it. It might be a deciding factor for something, or maybe even the beginning thread for something new. Something great.

If he looks scraggly, it’ll make him look even more stupid than he already is, which will ruin everything. He’s already embarrassed himself in front of the hero before, he won’t do it again.

Izuku clears his throat, putting Auntie's sewing supplies back into her box and sliding it to the side. "My suit is way better than all of your hero costume designs anyway."

He makes sure to say it casually, like it's a fact, as he knows that's a surefire way to get his friend fired up.

He's proved right when Kacchan sits up suddenly, an angry *hah?* escaping the blond's mouth. "The fuck did you say, Deku?"

Izuku is already throwing open the bedroom door, hoping he can get down the stairs and into the safety zone before it's too late.

He's not quick enough, however, as Kacchan grabs him around the middle and throws him back into the room as if he weighs nothing more than a potato wedge.

Izuku shrieks, scrambling away from his friend. "We can't wrestle, I'm too tired from All Might's training! This isn't fair!"

"All he did was make you run," Kacchan says, grabbing Izuku's ankle and yanking him back with ease. "And you're already good at running, nerd."

Izuku uses the momentum to throw himself on the boy, bringing them both to the ground. He tries to pin the blond to the carpet, but he gets shoved off at the last moment. Now the positions are switched, and Kacchan is busy trying to hold the boy's arm behind his back.

"I feel like that was an insult," Izuku grunts, rolling out from under him.

This is all very practiced to them. They wrestle just about every time they see each other, sometimes with quirks, sometimes without. It's more of a show of strength, at least on the front, but really it's a show of endearment.

Kacchan isn't big on touch, or any kind of affection, really, so Izuku doesn't mind wrestling like this if it means his friend can still be around him without getting uncomfortable.

That doesn't mean Izuku's going to let himself lose, though.

He uses *Pull* to jerk the other boy off balance, dodging Kacchan's outstretched arms to get behind him. He kicks the back of one of his knees and forces him down to the floor with a hand on his back.

Kacchan sets off a mini explosion to change his direction, twisting to pull Izuku down. In a matter of seconds, Izuku is being put in a chokehold with Kacchan holding him still from behind.

“Yield,” his friend hisses.

He can’t. If Izuku does, that means Kacchan will gain another point. That’ll put Kacchan in the lead, which means they won’t be even anymore.

“No!”

“Do it, nerd!” The boy increases the force of the hold just slightly; he wouldn’t actually choke Izuku out. They’ve never *really* hurt each other when doing this before. “Do it, or I’ll—”

There’s a sharp knock on the door, and then Auntie is poking her head in. “Hey, what’s going on in here?”

She pauses, taking in the sight of both boys on the carpeted floor: Izuku wriggling in Kacchan’s grip like a dying fish, Kacchan kneeling behind him with what’s probably a blank expression now that someone has interrupted their wrestling, and then the costume balled up a few feet away from them.

Oh. Double whammy.

She doesn’t seem surprised in the slightest, though, and she doesn’t pay the suit any mind before looking at Izuku with a soft smile. Well, soft for *her*.

“Izuku, kiddo, are you staying for dinner?”

Oh, right.

The boy forces Kacchan’s arm away from his throat just enough to speak. “Um, I don’t think I—” A knee presses into Izuku’s back, punching a sharp gasp out of him. “Ah, actually, I can. If that’s alright, of course!”

“Nonsense, sweetie. You know you’re always welcome here.” She fixes Kacchan with a fierce look. “Stop that, brat, you obviously won!”

The door closes before Izuku can argue the fact, but Kacchan just lets go with a satisfied smirk. “Now I’m winning.”

“For *now.”*

“Whatever.” Kacchan says, falling back onto his bed. “And I thought you were planning on spending the night here. Why were you gonna tell the hag no to dinner?”

Izuku looks away, rubbing the back of his neck. “Mm, well, you see—"

“Deku.” His voice is low, and Izuku risks a glance up to see his friend glaring at him. “Don’t tell me you’re actually going to meet up with the shitty hobo ninja.”

And okay, wow, that was quick.

Izuku crosses his arms. “He’s not shitty, Kacchan, and what if I am? I calculated only a forty percent chance that I’ll end up in prison by the time it’s all over.“

The explosive teen scoffs. “You’re a dumbass. Just don’t go crying to me if something bad happens. I don’t want to hear it.”

“Fine, I can respect that.” Izuku throws his Rabbit costume at the boy. “But I’m not playing any stupid video games with you until you admit how great this suit is.”

And so it goes.

By the time Mitsuki calls them down for dinner, they’re back to being even.

The night air is chilly, and the small bursts of wind here and there make Izuku glad his costume has a hood on it. It’s just cold enough to be refreshing, and Izuku relishes in the comforting feeling spreading over his skin as he crouches on the edge of a roof, watching the few adults and teens still out at this time of night.

It’s only a few minutes until ten, so Eraserhead should be here any second. If he even shows up, that is. This could still very well be a trap, although the chances of that are slim since Tsukauchi himself

told Izuku that's it not.

He doesn't know why he's still nervous. He shouldn't be. It's apparently *just a talk,* so he should be fine. He shouldn't be stressing out this much.

Key word, *shouldn't.* Because he definitely is.

Izuku starts to pace the rooftop. He's on top of a small, family owned cat café, and he really wishes it were open right now so he could go in there and pet all the cats. That sounds much more appealing than having to deal with his current predicament.

Dinner was great. Auntie's cooking is, again, always godly. The boy is happy that even with it not being Thursday the woman still let him over.

He checks his phone after a few minutes and seethes to himself. It's five after. He should *be* here by now. Doesn't this man care about professionalism?

Izuku knows the man may look homeless and indifferent all the time, but that doesn't mean he's ignorant. He's usually on time when it comes to meetings. His school records say that he's never been late to his classes, both as a student and a teacher.

So why the *fuck* is he not here—?

"Rabbit?"

His bōstaff is already out and pointed at the speaker before Izuku can truly process what just happened. Because there's no *fucking* way that Eraserhead managed to sneak up on him from behind for the *second* time.

That's twice more than anyone else has ever been able to, and it's too much. Izuku had been *searching,* damn it. He should've felt him long before he even stepped onto this roof.

The realization hits Izuku like a brick: *he's the only person who can sneak up on me.*

He doesn't know how to feel about that. He doesn't know why it's even possible, and it's not like he can just *ask* him.

Eraserhead, to his credit, merely blinks at the bōstaff hovering

threateningly a few inches away from his throat.

The hero is smart. Izuku would even go so far as to consider him a genius in his own right, so it's entirely possible that he *knows* that the side pointed at him is also the side where the blade of his katana slides out of.

And yet, instead of moving back or even countering with his own weapon, the man just slowly reaches up with a hand and pushes the metal away from him. "It's nice to see you, too," he deadpans.

Izuku pulls his staff back, still clutching it protectively by his side. He won't put it away. Not yet.

There's too many open variables here. Too many things that could go wrong.

He extends his senses once more to scan for anybody nearby, and he's relieved when he finds that Tsukauchi was telling the truth.

There's no one else here. It's not a trap. He's okay.

"You can relax," Eraserhead says, nodding at the boy's weapon. "I'm not going to try anything."

"Okay." He doesn't put it away, though, just shifts on his feet to *appear* more comfortable. That's the best the hero is going to get from him.

Eraserhead looks normal, if a little more tired than usual. He probably wants to be here even less than Izuku does, but the boy doesn't let himself feel sympathetic. He's the one who suggested this in the first place, so he can suffer with him.

The hero doesn't make any move to get closer, as he's already only a couple yards away. Too close.

Izuku is yet again struck with sudden anger at himself. Eraserhead is *this* close to him, a *dangerous* close, and Izuku didn't notice. Again.

It has to have something to do with his quirk. But nothing about Erasure should allow Izuku not to feel its presence. He can feel it now, of course, and he could feel it the other times before this meeting, too.

So why does it only happen when he's coming up on Izuku? Perhaps it

happens subconsciously. Perhaps Eraserhead activates some unknown part of his quirk without realizing it, and the outcome is *giving Izuku a fucking heart attack.*

“Kid? You alright?”

Oh. He’s been staring into space for too long. Eraserhead is still in the same place, a fact that Izuku is grateful for.

“I’m fine. What did you want to talk about?”

Izuku internally winces at his own sharpness. He doesn’t know why he’s being so straightforward, but Eraserhead doesn’t seem to mind.

His hands plunge into his pockets, the epitome of casualness. “I just wanted to make sure that we’re all on the same page about what’s going to happen next.”

“Oh?” Izuku’s heart jumps in his chest. The chilly air doesn’t feel so comforting anymore. “And what’s that?”

“Nothing.”

And—what? That’s not at all what Izuku expected, but okay.

The boy coughs. “Uh, can you elaborate? I think I lost you there.”

“Nothing is going to happen,” Eraserhead repeats. “Meaning that I, along with Tsukauchi, will not attempt to capture you or bring you in anymore.”

“Huh?” Izuku says intelligently.

He doesn’t get a reply, not that he expected one. It’s not Eraserhead’s fault that Izuku is a Grade A dumbass.

“Wait, so you’re going to just... let me go?"

“In essence, yes.”

It’s the first part that garners Izuku’s attention. The boy narrows his eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

“There’s one condition to this.”

Fuck. Izuku isn’t good with conditions. With any sort of debt, honestly. Those never usually end well for both parties.

Eraserhead must sense his hesitation, as he continues gruffly. “It’s nothing bad. I’m just asking that you continue to meet me here once every week, same time.”

And that throws Izuku a little off guard. He was expecting to have to promise something, or to do something for the man like help on some of his missions—not this.

It seems this discussion is full of surprises.

Izuku slides his bōstaff back into the holster on his back. “Why?”

It always comes back to that. *Why* is he doing this. *Why* does he care. *Why* is he even bothering with making a deal with Izuku.

Eraserhead doesn’t care about vigilantes. He doesn’t even try to capture them most of the time, so what makes Izuku so different?

“I just want to make sure you won’t end up dead, or worse,” Eraserhead says. “There’s no secret intentions behind it, kid. It’s for me and Tsukauchi to keep track of your wellbeing, that’s all.”

Wellbeing. As if he *cares.*

A cricket chirps nearby, prompting Izuku to speak. “And if I say no?”

There’s a slight pause. It’s obvious that both are remembering their first conversation. The first time Izuku asked that.

Eraserhead lifts a shoulder in a careless shrug. “Nothing.”

Oh.

Izuku searches the man’s face for any sign of dishonesty, and, after not finding anything, he nods once. “Okay.” At Eraserhead’s blank stare, he adds, “I’ll do it. What day do you want it to be?”

Eraserhead raises his brows in slight surprise, but otherwise his face remains unchanged. “It doesn’t matter to me. Thursdays would be better, however—"

“I can’t do Thursday!” Izuku flushes at the sudden scrutinous look he gets in response. “I—I have stuff to do on that day. I won’t be able to make it.”

He goes to Kacchan’s on Thursdays. Sure, he might not spend the night there every time he comes over, like today, for example, but it’s

better safe than sorry. He wouldn't want to have to sneak out of the house.

"Fine. How about Fridays?"

"That's good." Izuku says, frowning suddenly from beneath his mask. "Uh, what if I can't make it one night? Like, what do I do?"

Eraserhead seems prepared for this question, as he straightens up a little to his full height. Izuku is once again reminded of how *tall* the man is. "I know you won't be able to make it every night. You have a life too, and stuff happens. So if you can't, for whatever reason, just text me."

Okay. That's easier than he thought. So he's not completely trapped. He still has his freedom.

"Alright. Is there, uh, anything else you wanted to discuss?"

Eraserhead squints at him. "Only the obvious. I'm sure you know that just because I'm not going to capture you doesn't mean that everyone else will start doing the same."

"'Course," Izuku nods. He's not *that* dumb, after all. "So, is that it?"

"Seems that way. I have to finish my patrol, kid, so I'll see you this Friday, same place and time, alright?"

"Yeah. I can do that." After a pregnant pause, Izuku bows quickly. "Thank you, Eraserhead. Really."

"Sure, Rabbit." The man just dips his head in goodbye and turns around to leave.

The wind starts to pick up again, and Izuku really does wince this time as he catches sight of the end of the hero's capture weapon flapping slightly. It looks like somebody hacked some of it off, and speaking of —

"Hey! Wait!" Izuku rushes forward, hands digging in his pockets until he finds what he's looking for. He pushes the small piece of fabric into the man's chest before stepping away quickly. "Uh, sorry for cutting it. I know it must be expensive to get it fixed."

Eraserhead gives him another one of those indiscernible looks before replying, voice edged with amusement, "It's alright. I have to do it

sometimes myself to get out of certain situations."

He continues on, as if he didn't just drop a major bombshell on the analysis part of Izuku's brain. Because *what.* Why hasn't he thought of that?

Of course! The man's capture weapon aids him in a lot of his fights, but it can also serve as a huge disadvantage if a villain uses it for themself or if the hero gets stuck on something.

Brilliant, Izuku thinks. He has to add that into his notebook when he gets a chance.

"Oh, and by the way." Eraserhead throws him a glance over the shoulder, a smirk tugging at his lips. "That mural you painted of me was really something, kid. You've got some talent, I'll give you that."

Izuku laughs at the unexpectedness of the comment, and he watches Eraserhead leave with a funny feeling blooming in his chest.

Because alright, maybe, just *maybe,* things won't be so bad.

Chapter End Notes

b

adjustments

Chapter Notes

we're getting closer to the actual storyline! this is a fluffy chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before Izuku knows it, a little over a month goes by.

The pile on Dagobah Beach has been growing smaller and smaller over the days, even in the short amount of time he's been working on it. All Might told Izuku that he's being a little *too* quick with it, that he needs to slow down if he wants to keep building muscle and stamina over time.

Izuku takes the *too quick* part as a compliment, even though the only reason he's been able to move everything so quickly is because All Might has been letting him use *Boost* for certain things now.

Together they came up with a change of plan. So now, instead of spending an hour on it every morning, Izuku will only spend thirty minutes cleaning it up. The extra time gives them more opportunities to try new training regimes and exercises.

New training is code for more *hell.*

But the good kind of hell. Is it bad to say that Izuku enjoys it? Training his body like this feels good. He's always been a bit fit, of course, but not like this. It hasn't been long, but he can feel the difference.

Especially during his patrols. His stamina is even better than it was, and he can lift fifty pounds more even *without* his enhancements.

The only downside is that now that he's burning more energy—not just on patrols anymore—he's starting to get hungry.

Incredibly hungry. He doesn't eat a lot as it is, so he's used to surviving off a little less than what he should be, but now he feels like he's *starving.*

He goes over to the Bakugou's more often now, and he knows they don't mind, but it still makes him guilty. On the weekends he goes to the pizzeria to help cook and clean, as Ms. Hanako lets him eat

whatever he wants on the job—she tries to feed him for free even when he's *not* working, but Izuku won't have that.

He has to *earn* food. The family struggles as it is, he shouldn't take anything of theirs without some form of repayment.

And one morning at the park, All Might seems to notice his struggles as well.

Izuku is busy balancing on a bench with his eyes closed, one hand being used to keep himself up, when the hero comes up to him in his smaller form, voice edged with concern.

"You look a little pale there, my boy, are you sure you're alright?"

Izuku, still upside-down with his feet straight in the air, tries for a laugh. "I mean this is kinda difficult, it's taking a lot of focus—"

"You've looked like that all week. It can't possibly be from today's training."

What he means is *that's the dumbest excuse I've ever heard.*

Izuku can't really form a good response when he's balancing like this, so he instead shakes his free hand in what's hopefully an *I don't know, then* gesture and purses his lips to pretend like he's concentrating.

He can feel the hero's gaze on him. It's disconcerting.

"Have you been eating enough?"

Izuku's eyes fly open, and the jolt that goes through his body is enough to have him tumbling off the bench and falling onto the sidewalk.

He lays there for a moment and briefly wonders if it's possible to ask whatever god that exists up above to strike him down, only for his world to sway as Small Might carefully picks him up by the back of his shirt and sets him on his feet.

The man is close to him now, close enough to have to crane his neck to peer down at him. Even as Small Might, he's the same height as his hero form.

"I can't help but notice that you've gotten a little lighter, even while gaining muscle." His brows scrunch together. "You are following the meal plan, right?"

If it were any other time, and probably any other *person* asking this question, Izuku would have said something like *so you think I'm skinny?* But Small Might doesn't seem to be in the mood for jokes, and Izuku doesn't think changing the subject will do him any good right now.

He doesn't like the way the man is staring at him. It makes him feel like a bug under a microscope, and he doesn't like it one bit.

He's—he's eating, okay? Maybe not a lot, and maybe not *nearly* enough, but he's eating. He's eating more than he was before he started the training with All Might, and his nonexistent wallet has surely been feeling the toll.

He's *trying,* is the thing. But it's not like he can tell the man that. He can't be a burden to the number one hero, just can't. The man has other things to worry about. To *care* about.

Izuku crosses his arms to hide how his hands have started trembling and kicks at the dirt, looking anywhere but at the hero in front of him. "I *am* following it." Lies. All lies. He hates himself for deceiving his idol, and yet there's no other way to get out of this without creating more problems. "I just—I *forget* to eat sometimes, you know? With everything going on, it's hard to stay on track, that's all."

With everything going on.

Izuku hopes the man will latch onto that piece of information and leave him alone. That he'll ponder on that instead of the situation at hand and hopefully miss the fact that Izuku is *lying* to him.

The boy hates manipulating people. Hates planting bombs in his sentences and playing with people's minds, and yet he never stops. Here he is, using one of his many methods of manipulation on a man he never thought he'd *dare* try *any* of them on.

It seems to work, though.

After what feels like a while but could've only been ten seconds, Small Might sighs. "I feared so."

Izuku chances a glance back up, expecting to see disappointment or maybe even anger on the man's face, but is instead met with the familiar sight of Small Might transforming into *All* Might.

"Which is why I brought *sandwiches!"*

And *huh?* Izuku is sure he's misheard him.

All Might suddenly jumps onto the bench and then leaps onto a nearby tree, proceeding to pull a whole fucking *cooler* out of the branches.

Izuku can only watch in mild confusion and a little bit of fear as All Might drops back down and carries the cooler over to a small patch of grass, waving at the boy to follow him.

He does so hesitantly. "Was that there the whole time?"

"Indeed it was!" All Might says cheerfully, taking out a blanket from *god knows where* and spreading it across the ground. "I figured having a break at the park would be nice, saying as you haven't rested since we first started!"

"But I take breaks on the weekends—"

"And you can take another break today, my boy! A day off won't hurt!" All Might plops down and begins to take out bags of food. "Well? I can't eat all this myself."

You probably could, Izuku thinks, but holds his tongue.

While All Might doesn't have an enhanced metabolism like he does, he still needs to eat a lot to keep up with the energy he uses while maintaining his bigger form.

"Ham or turkey?" The number one hero asks, as if this is fucking *normal.*

Izuku glances around, trying to see if anybody's looking. "Uh, All Might, won't someone see you? We're in the public park."

"I'm used to publicity, Young Midoriya! But I guess it is better if I don't attract attention this time." A puff of smoke surrounds him for a moment before revealing his natural form. "I don't think you'd want your face to be plastered on the news, right?"

Oh *hell* no. That's the worse thing that could happen. His father could see it, and that wouldn't end well for *anyone* involved.

Izuku laughs nervously. "Yeah, I'd rather that didn't happen."

"Understandable," Small Might says. He then hands Izuku a few plastic baggies with sandwiches in them, passing him some chips as

well. “I made these in a rush this morning, so forgive me if they’re not the best.”

Izuku’s eyes bug out a little as he takes in just how many sandwiches the man made. There must be, what, thirty? And he just gave Izuku ten—*why the hell does he have so much?*

“No, no!” Izuku rushes to say. “I’m sure they’re great, but why did you make so many?”

“Well, I figured you would take the remaining with you. I know we both have big appetites.”

He thought about me this morning?

The hero made this much with the intention of giving him the leftovers. Izuku doesn’t know how to process that information.

Izuku takes a bite out of one of the sandwiches, almost choking as he realizes just how fucking *great* it tastes. Like actually.

It’s not just because Izuku is practically starving at the moment—the food the hero put together actually tastes *good.*

And Izuku says as much, which causes the man to chuckle a bit as he thanks him.

The boy is equal parts relieved and nervous. The discussion on his eating habits has stopped, at least for now. There’s no telling when All Might will bring it up again.

Izuku places a few chips inside one of his sandwiches to give it a crunchy texture, and he grins at the hero in front of him. “Thank you for this! Everything is delicious!”

Small Might flashes him a smile, eyes crinkling. “Of course. It isn’t often I get to have a picnic like this. It truly is a nice day out, isn’t it?”

Picnic. The word sounds foreign to him, even though he knows, logically, what it is. Izuku has never had one before.

“It is,” Izuku agrees, because there’s nothing else he can say to that. There’s a warm feeling building in his stomach now, and he feels himself start to smile alongside the hero.

There’s a few birds singing a song near them, perched on the bench Izuku was on just a few minutes prior. The boy tears off some bread

and throws it at them, giggling when he sees more birds fly over to feast on the food.

He glances at Small Might, who's watching the scene as well with amusement.

He must feel his gaze, as he turns back around and starts on another sandwich. "Tell me a little about *you,* Young Midoriya. I don't think I've asked you before, which is kind of rude on my part."

Izuku doesn't know what compels him to listen, but he does.

He talks.

He tells him what he can, tells him about Kacchan and Ms. Hanako and his thoughts and analyses on the latest heroes, and the number one eagerly chips in at different times.

It looks like he's actually interested in what Izuku has to say, which only spurs the boy's rambling on even further. *No one* likes to hear him talk like this—the only person who tolerates it is Kacchan, and even then he playfully insults him about it.

But All Might doesn't. He listens, and when Izuku is done he allows the boy a snippet of his *own* life outside of his hero career.

So in the end, it's safe to say that Izuku enjoys the first picnic he's ever had.

Present Mic is cool when he's on duty and when he's off, Izuku finds.

He'd guessed that in the beginning, of course, when Yamada saved him from those bullies in the alley, but it's nice to have his theory supported even further.

The man comes into the laundromat Izuku goes to once every other week. Something must have happened to his washer or dryer, the boy

thinks, as he never used to see him here a few weeks ago.

Yamada arrives at the laundromat at the same ungodly hour as the previous two times, and if Izuku didn't know better, he'd say that the man is doing it because he *knows* Izuku goes at that time.

The boy does his laundry every week instead of every *other* week like normal people—don't judge him, okay, most heroes have multiples of their costumes, he can't afford to have any more than one—so he only sees the voice hero half the time.

He likes to talk with the man and just *be* there with him. Yamada is funny and nice, and his quirk is *bubbly,* as weird as it sounds.

It feels soft, and Izuku likes it.

The third time Present Mic comes to the laundromat, hands full with his basket of clothes and laundry detergent, he brings snacks.

Izuku isn't quite ready for it when Yamada suddenly hands him a couple Slim Jims while he's writing in his notebook.

The boy flushes, waving his hands in front of him as he pops his earbuds out so as not to be rude. "Ah, no thank you! I wouldn't want to—"

"It's alright, kiddo, really." Yamada practically drops them onto his lap and turns back to his own snack: a bag of goldfish. "I don't like those anyway. I'd much rather someone else have them so I won't have to throw 'em out, ya dig?"

No, the more logical, no-bullshit part of Izuku's brain says, *you saw me eating a Slim Jim the first time you saw me here. You probably went out and bought me some before you came, as you arrived ten minutes later than your usual time.*

The gullible, *sadder* part of his brain says that the man *did* in fact just give it to him because he didn't want it, and not because he actually went out of his way to buy him some food.

And also, what's with the heroes he knows trying to feed him stuff nowadays? First it was All Might, now Present Mic—who's next, Eraserhead?

Hopefully he didn't just jinx it. Well, hopefully he *did.* He wants to know what the man would even offer him as food, as Izuku doesn't

think he's even seen the man eat during one of their meetings.

But Izuku doesn't say any of that to the voice hero. He just concedes with a quick dip of his head and carefully starts to unwrap one of the Slim Jims, putting one earbud back in like he's done all the other times.

Yamada munches on his goldfish, tapping his foot to an imaginary song.

It's familiar and comfortable. The one laundromat worker that's present at this time is busy sleeping at their desk, and Izuku doesn't blame them. He would be too if he had to be here at this time of night and oversee literally two people and what Izuku swears is a ghost in the front corner.

Izuku is adding more onto his Present Mic page when the man glances over at him, still eating his goldfish.

"Oh, is that me?" He looks excited, almost giddy.

And no, Izuku wants to say, it's not. It's just your doppelgänger who shares the same name and hero costume as you, but Izuku doesn't say it. He's only a bitch on the inside. He actually tries to be nice to people, contrary to popular belief, especially his idols. He *wants* to be nice. His mind is just an ass, that's all.

"Uh, yeah," Izuku says, his cheeks turning a dark red.

What if he finds it stalkerish? Or weird? It's not normal for someone to take notes on actual people, after all. That's a therapist's job. Or, if Izuku is willing to go deeper down the rabbit hole, a *villain's* job.

"That sketch is really good, kiddo! You captured my support gear really well!" Yamada turns to face him fully, and Izuku has to force himself not to shrink back at the attention. "Where did you learn to draw like that?"

"Oh! I picked up some tips from videos online. I had to have some basis of anatomy if I wanted to sketch heroes and stuff."

It's not a lie.

Yamada doesn't seem alarmed by this in the slightest. He just smiles wider. "Well it's great! I'm glad to have another artist to talk to."

He's an artist? Another thing to add to the notebook! And while he's here —

"Um, Yamada, I actually have a question about your support gear."

"Shoot! I'm all ears."

Thinking it would be better to just show the man instead of asking, Izuku hastily gives the man the notebook and points to a certain paragraph, pulling back quickly afterwards. "I was wondering if you could fact check this for me? I mean, it is about you."

"Oh, wow," Yamada marvels, eyes skimming over the two pages filled to the brim with notes and small sketches. "You wrote all this?"

Izuku just nods, not having the heart to tell the man that there's actually four more pages dedicated to him right after these two.

"The speakers on my neck actually help control the direction, not so much the output," he corrects kindly after he's read both pages. "I honestly have no say on where I want to direct the sound without them. The only thing I can control by myself is how loud I make it."

"Oh, that makes more sense! I was thinking that, thank you!"

"I'm impressed, though! That's some detailed work you got there." Yamada's washer beeps a few feet away, and he gets up and gives the boy a gentle punch to the shoulder. "You'd be a good hero with that kind of brain, kiddo!"

And Izuku is frozen, his mind coming to a screeching halt. *You'd be a good hero.* The touch on his shoulder has left but the feeling stays.

It's not good, but it's not bad either. Izuku will give the feeling a seven out of ten. He thinks faintly that he wouldn't mind it if Yamada did it again.

And that brings up the other thing. Izuku told the voice hero his name during their second meeting, but he has a feeling he's forgotten it since he never calls him by it. It's always *little listener* or *kiddo* or some variation of the sort. Izuku doesn't mind. It's endearing, and if he can pretend that the voice hero cares, than that's enough for him.

Besides, Yamada calls *all* of his fans listeners. It's not like he's special.

He gives the man another glance when he comes back, a thought

suddenly popping into his head. “Do you have cats?”

“Why do you ask, kiddo?”

He doesn’t sound suspicious or taken aback, just curious, so Izuku doesn’t know why he gets so nervous. He fiddles with his pen before gesturing at the man’s clothing. “It’s just, uh, the hair on your shirt. It’s too thin to be from a dog, and you always have some on your clothes when you come here, so I just assumed you did, but obviously you might not so that’s why I—”

Yamada, thankfully, cuts off his rambling before he can make a fool of himself. “I have three cats, actually! Here, I’ll show you.”

It turns out that the man has a *lot* of pictures of his cats. He has five albums dedicated to them, to be exact, and Izuku leans over a bit to see them better.

The first picture he shows is of a fluffy gray cat that Yamada says is named Pickles because of her green eyes. The other two are both short-hairs, and one is a calico called Meatball while the other is a light brown tabby by the name of Sushi.

Izuku falls in love immediately.

He’s a sucker for animals. For cats, especially, since they remind him of Kacchan: prickly and angry on the outside, warm and cuddly on the inside.

But what gains his attention is their names. “Why are they all named after—?”

“Food?” Yamada interrupts with a knowing look. “I honestly can’t tell ya, listener. I only named Pickles. My partner chose the other two.”

Partner, huh? Izuku doesn’t ask, though he really wants to. He has an idea who the man might be talking about, but it’s really not his place to speculate.

Izuku is still stuck on the *cats.* He doesn’t complain when Yamada shows him even more pictures. The more he looks, the more he wants one.

They’re low maintenance, and they’re apparently a little easier to handle than dogs. Maybe he can convince Kacchan to get one so he can visit it when he comes over.

Or maybe Izuku can just get a cat. He may not be responsible enough to feed *himself,* but he can definitely take care of *another* creature. A cat would be a good companion.

But then he remembers what he does for a living, and that thought goes down the drain.

Okay, so maybe a pet is a bad idea.

The first official meeting with Eraserhead was awkward. At least for Izuku; he doesn't think the hero is *capabl*e of being awkward.

And every time they meet he still gets spooked by Eraserhead. *Every* goddamn time, in fact. He doesn't know why, but that doesn't mean he's going to stop trying. Izuku still jumps, he's just gotten a little better at hiding how much it affects him.

It's their fifth meeting, however, when the dynamic changes.

Izuku is sitting there, brows scrunched as he tries to feel for the man's quirk as he's started doing all the other times, when something sounds from behind him.

A scuff of the foot. Casual and light amidst the soft whirring of the wind and the sounds of the city bustling below.

The footsteps are familiar, but only in theory. He knows who it belongs to, but it still sounds *wrong.* Because Eraserhead doesn't make any sound when he walks. Just like Izuku, they've both been trained in stealth. You can't hear them unless they *want* you to hear them.

And Izuku can hear him this time. He still couldn't feel his quirk a few moments before, but he *hears* him. He didn't get spooked.

This makes Izuku frown, and he turns to face Eraserhead before the underground hero can even speak.

“You did that on purpose.”

The man blinks at him, not bothering with a reply. And okay, Izuku figures, maybe he is being a bit cryptic.

“Your shoes,” he elaborates, glaring at Eraserhead as if he’s wronged him somehow. “You made sure I could hear you.”

“Figured you wouldn’t jump this time. I was right.”

This bitch.

The man continues walking closer and sits a few feet away, hanging his legs over the side of the roof. “If it truly bothers you so much I won’t do it next time.”

Izuku tenses. “No, wait—”

He doesn’t miss the hero’s small smirk as he hurries to correct himself.

The next time he sees Eraserhead after that, he’s just Midoriya Izuku.

He’s walking home from the library late at night, as usual, a few books on Japanese Sign Language tucked under his arm, when he hears commotion up ahead.

Great. Another mugging.

This one will hopefully go quick. He’s stopped so many thieves before that it’s almost like second nature to him now.

He places his books carefully on the sidewalk before strolling up and taking in the situation.

A younger man, probably only in his early thirties, is being backed up against a wall with his hands in the air. “Please, I don’t have anything,

I swear! I would've given it to you by now if I did!"

The robber looks to have a mutant type quirk, so Izuku doesn't have to worry about anything. The pointed ears on the man won't do him any harm. "Shaddup and hand me your wallet."

"But—but you told me to keep my hands up, how can I—"

"Do it, or else!"

The man is crying now. "Please, I can't!"

Izuku kind of wants to find out what *or else* entails, but then he sees the gun being pulled from the criminal's waistband, and that's when he thinks *oh, so that's what that bulge was. And here I was thinking the man was packing.*

Almost lazily, Izuku raises a palm and slips into the criminal's view. It's dark, he can barely see a thing—which means they won't be able to tell what's happening either. He can use whatever quirk he wants.

Izuku *yanks* the gun out of the mugger's hand and catches it by the barrel, swiftly jabbing the man in the temple. And like a rock, he's down for the count.

Well. That was easy. And kind of pathetic.

Izuku steps over the criminal and picks up the discarded wallet on the ground. "Hey, dude, you dropped your—"

He's talking to thin air, as when he turns back around the victim is gone. Fuck.

Yep. Izuku really is out of it if he didn't even hear the dude leaving. That just makes his job much worse.

Peeking through the wallet, he sighs. There's only a few bills in there. The person is obviously not very rich, so he won't take anything. The man looks like he probably needs every bit of it. It would be wrong of Izuku to steal it. Especially after fighting for it *not* to be stolen.

The only logical thing to do is take it to the police. Well, he was already gonna have to do that, saying as he now has a very unconscious criminal on the ground and a dead phone. Usually Izuku just calls Tsukauchi or the police and tells him where the criminal is, but now he can't. And he's sure as hell not wasting his money on a

pay phone.

He can't just leave him there; there's no telling what other crimes he'll commit once he wakes up. So he guesses he'll just have to make the five minute walk to the nearest police station.

This is just fantastic, Izuku thinks, hauling the man up over his shoulder—Jesus Christ what does this man eat, he weighs a fucking *ton*—and grabbing the gun off the ground. He'll set his books on the man's back in hopes that they'll stay there during the duration of the trip.

He was planning on just going home, charging his phone with his solar powered battery, and then reading all of the JSL training books, but of course things don't go his way.

Present Mic has recently revealed to him that he's actually hard of hearing, same as Kacchan is. It seems having quirks that are loud have their disadvantages on both sides. Now, Izuku already knows a little bit of sign language, courtesy of his friend, but now he has even *more* of a reason to get fluent in it.

And besides, his brain is telling him that if he doesn't perfect the language *tonight,* he's going to die a very terrible death. He doesn't have the will to argue with himself on how illogical that is and instead becomes resigned to the toxic inner thoughts of his mind.

Izuku smushes his face onto the glass doors of the police station and lets out an evil laugh at the short scream he gets in return. The receptionist hurriedly opens the doors, helping him inside since he *does* have a criminal on his back.

"Midoriya," the lady starts, sounding both tired and expectant at the same time. "What the *hell* is that."

He grins. "A body."

"Yeah, I can see that, but what are you—*oh good lord."* She cuts herself off as Izuku drops the man onto the floor without a care in the world. "Another mugger?"

Izuku nods. "He had a gun."

"What do you get yourself into, sugar? This is the second time you've brought someone in like this." She takes the weapon and wallet from his outstretched hands, beckoning him further inside and away from

the would-be-mugger. “Hold on a sec, I’ll call some guards.”

And so Izuku hops up onto the front desk, swinging his legs and popping two of the *take only one* lollipops into his mouth as he waits.

Might as well get a start on that reading, huh?

Not long after, though, there’s multiple voices coming from the hallway, and then two officers are jogging forward with handcuffs in their hands. They immediately kneel down and check his health, before moving him to stand upright.

It seems the guy is waking up ever so slowly. Izuku didn’t hit him that hard, after all. He’s not cruel.

The next person out of the hallway is Detective Tsukauchi himself, followed by—is that *Eraserhead?*

Fuck. This is awkward. Izuku met with him not even a few nights ago, and while the man doesn’t really know him as Midoriya Izuku, only as Rabbit, it’s still nerve-racking to be near him. Because what if he *finds out.*

The detective only shoots him a *look* before heading for the officers, a tablet in his hand.

Uh-oh.

“Any injuries?” Tsukauchi asks briskly.

“Nope,” the female officer reports. “Just a little sore spot on his temple, probably from when he was knocked out. No other injuries that we can see.”

The other officer, who’s busy holding the criminal up with both of his large arms, cuts in. “We’ve been looking for this guy. Has three other incidents on his record, and his poster is actually on the wall over there.”

Izuku looks and sees that the criminal’s ugly face *is* in fact on the wall. Hm. Maybe he should’ve injured him a bit more, as he’s also listed as a pedophile on the poster.

The first officer speaks again. “He’s been robbing people and threatening them with a gun, which we now have as evidence.”

Izuku watches the detective nod at the officers before turning to the

criminal, who's now starting to blink his eyes open. "You, sir, will be going to prison for a long time after a very lengthy trial. I'm sure you'll be very comfy there." He says something else to the cops, and then the criminal is being dragged away, probably into a holding cell before they can conduct an interrogation.

The boy hums around a mouthful of treats. "That was satisfying."

"And *you."*

Izuku squeaks as the detective's fiery gaze turns to *him,* and he can't help but smile nervously when the man starts to tap his foot. The boy sees Eraserhead glance between them a few times at the corner of his eye, and he swears he hears the hero mumble an *I knew it* under his breath.

"You've been quiet for too long, I should've known you'd do something reckless. *Again* with the martyr complex, son. We've been over this." He sounds done with this conversation. Izuku kind of is too, but the lollipops are giving him some extra energy. "You can't keep putting yourself in danger like this. You don't know what he could've had—in terms of both quirks and weapons."

Izuku crosses his arms petulantly, one of the JSL books still spread out over his lap. "I disarmed him, though, and he has a mutant quirk. 'S not dangerous to me at all."

His voice is kind of garbled due to the sweets, but he knows Tsukauchi can understand him.

"Tell that to his other three victims, one of whom got shot in the foot."

And okay, *that* makes Izuku wince. He didn't mean to sound insensitive.

"And also." The detective lifts up the tablet to show him something, one hand placed on his hip. "Care to tell me what you're doing in this video?"

And Izuku frowns, leaning forward on the desk to see because *what can he possibly be talking about now? What video?* He stares at the screen, confused now, because this looks like a bird's eye view of the inside of a mall. He can see people walking around with different bags in their hands, as if they've just got done shopping and are going for more goodies. There are multiple stores on the corners with banners

on the walls. He can see a fountain in the middle of the scenery, and—

Oh. *The* fountain.

Izuku wants the ground to swallow him up and never let him out as he watches screen-Izuku jump into the fountain and then slip on his way out of it. It's pretty clear when this footage was taken. This is from a couple months back when he went to the mall with Kacchan. His friend doesn't show up on the screen, and Izuku is incredibly thankful for that. The last thing he needs is for the blond to get in trouble because of him.

He tears his gaze away from the tablet to look back up at the detective. "Uh, that's not me."

"That's not you? Really?" The man magnifies the footage to focus on the green mess that is Izuku's hair, and also on those familiar red shoes he always wears. "Watch it again, son."

Eraserhead moves a bit to watch it alongside Izuku, causing the boy to want to curl up and die even more. Great, now he's embarrassing himself yet again in front of the underground hero.

As if the flash drive incident wasn't bad enough, now he's got this to think about at three in the morning when he's pretending to sleep.

It's not fair that the camera quality is actually really good, too. Izuku thinks it should be illegal for mall footage to be this clear. It's clearer than his skin, for fuck's sake. This should *not* be happening.

"I mean, that *could* be me," Izuku starts slowly. "But since you don't have any concrete evidence..."

Tsukauchi looks like he needs a shot of tequila. "I can't with you right now. Just can't."

Eraserhead takes another look at the screen, then shifts his gaze to Izuku, his face giving nothing away.

The detective starts to rant again, but Izuku barely hears him. He's busy weighing the pros and cons of slapping a pro hero. He wants to slap Eraserhead, just for fun. Just to see what he'll do.

Will he kill him? No, that's too dramatic, and also kind of illegal. He might arrest him, or—no, not that either. It's more likely that the man will just make it his personal mission to make Izuku's life a living

hell.

And that thought sounds kind of festive. Hm. He wonders if Eraserhead is the type to just come to terms with Izuku's chaos, like Tsukauchi has, or if he'll shut it down quickly. Or maybe he'll create his *own* chaos. That'd be fun.

"Are you even listening to me, Midoriya?"

Oh, he should be paying attention to the probably spectacular lecture that the detective is giving him right now, if the incessant hand movements are anything to go by. "Not really."

"For the love of—" Tsukauchi cuts himself off with a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I can't wait until my shift is over. I need a drink."

"Drinking isn't healthy for you. You told me that once."

The detective shakes his head. "I won't charge you for this, Midoriya, so you're free to go. Thank you for taking in that criminal and turning in the wallet, but I think you should head home now. And please *stay* there for the rest of the night. I trust you can get back without an escort this time."

Izuku hops off the desk and gives the man a horribly inaccurate salute. "Yessir!"

He gives a brief bow to Eraserhead and then starts to run, limbs burning as he uses the energy the lollipops gave him to rush out of the door, not wanting to test Tsukauchi's patience lest the man changes his mind. He ignores the *and stop using your quirk!* that comes from behind him, choosing to instead run even faster.

He loves annoying Tsukauchi. Either as Rabbit or as Midoriya Izuku, that's just what brings him the most joy in life.

In fact, pissing people off in general is why he's still alive and kicking. Spite is a very good motivator.

But in Izuku's defense, the fountain incident was almost two months ago. It would be unfair to punish him for it now, which is probably why Tsukauchi let him off the hook.

Besides, it's not *technically* illegal. Izuku doesn't break *every* law, thank you.

Just a few of them. No biggie.

Chapter End Notes

dads for days. you guys can have a dad too!!

l

parallels

Chapter Notes

cw: drugs, overdose, mentioned pedophilia

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku has a tendency to notice every little detail. He magnifies small nuances into major things, largely because small nuances can quickly become breaking points for strangers and villains.

When he's going undercover, or when he's trying to sneak in somewhere for a job, he has to be careful. He has to be able to *see*.

He's learned how to manage moods and read the room. He can perceive danger in just the order of words that people say. He can read body language and see what other people usually can't—or, *won't*. This is all a natural outgrowth of him trying to stay alive during his missions and encounters with strangers on the streets.

It's not that everyone else is oblivious, no, of course not. Izuku isn't that naïve. It's more that he *has* to be like this. It's just that this habit of his is what keeps him *alive*. This attention to detail that has made him over analyze minor nuances to the extent that it gives him much more anxiety than he would have otherwise—it's kind of like a safety net.

It prevents certain events from happening, and under the worst case scenario where something bad happens anyway, it helps to handle those issues and stop the situation from escalating.

So, in short, Izuku stays alive solely because he can *see*.

This ability of his also allows him to draw many different conclusions and patterns from events that he's witnessed even the first time around.

Izuku sees things in high definition, and sometimes he sees things that he'd rather not. He can notice and create patterns simply by watching and listening—a skill that has helped him grow into the successful vigilante he is today.

Well, that last part is debatable, but whatever.

Right now, sitting in the library and chewing on his pen, he's noticed another pattern. Though this time he can't really see the advantage from pointing this one out to himself. There's no villain he can use it against, no question he can avoid. It's just kind of sitting there, weighing at the back of his mind like a pile of bricks over wet cardboard.

It'll fall eventually, maybe even sooner rather than later, and Izuku will start to spiral into that awful feeling he gets when he doesn't *understand* something. When he doesn't know *why* things are happening.

It seems that the newest adults in his life have been doing similar things to him without Izuku realizing it. They've been joking and conversing with him, either making small talk or just being a genuinely good person around him, and he doesn't mind that, obviously. That's normal, that's polite, that's *decent,* and that's not why he's so frazzled.

All Might, Present Mic, and Eraserhead are all amazing people. They're great heroes, sure, but just about anyone can be if they try hard enough or have the right mindset. But to be a genuinely good *person?* That's when it gets a little harder.

They were nice to him. Still are, in fact. It's just that once they deemed it safe, they moved *closer.*

Both metaphorically and physically.

The first one was Present Mic. Which, now that Izuku has the opportunity to truly think about, isn't surprising. The man always sits in the same seat two spots over from Izuku at the laundromat. He's never sat anywhere else; that's just his spot now, same as how Izuku's spot is near the corner and just out of sight of the door—Izuku can see anyone coming in, but they can't see him.

Yamada never gets too close unless he's passing by or showing him something on his phone. At least, that's how it was for a while. But then, during one of their laundry meetings, he just... moved closer.

He walked in the door, dirty clothes in a basket in one hand and detergent in the other, and sat down right beside him. Izuku didn't even notice it until his shoulder brushed against Yamada's arm when he stood up to put his own clothes in the dryer. The voice hero is tall, just like All Might and Eraserhead, so the new contact made him pause for a moment, because *that's never happened before.*

A quick, hopefully not suspicious look back confirmed that Yamada had indeed sat in the seat right next to him instead of his usual one two spots over. And since he identified the change, Izuku then noticed the larger shadow that loomed over his seat due to the lamp right to the side of Yamada, hanging from the ceiling.

God. Why is Izuku so *short.* Or maybe everyone around him is giant. Yes. That's more plausible. His five-foot-two self cries every time.

But back to the point. Neither of them acknowledged it then. It's almost like Yamada didn't notice he did it either, though that's obviously not true.

The next person to do something similar was Eraserhead. It's a couple months into their newfound hero-and-vigilante relationship when it starts. He usually sits on the roof's edge at their meeting spot with a good distance of a least five feet between them. It's more of an unspoken rule: don't get too close lest the other gets uncomfortable.

They both understood that, so everything was cool.

But then the five feet eventually became four. And then three.

Izuku tells himself that *he's* the one that closed another foot that time only because it's getting chillier with each passing night and Eraserhead is like a heater with that capture weapon around his neck.

If the man noticed it, which he most certainly did, Izuku thinks, he had the decency not to mention it.

Now, the last person to be involved in the pattern is All Might.

While the man has always been the more touchy-feely of the group of three heroes in Izuku's life right now, he's never made any move to outright be physical with him.

Sparring doesn't count, Izuku thinks, whatsoever. A jab to the throat is not a sign of endearment.

But then things changed. Along with getting closer to Izuku metaphorically (the picnics seem to happen more often now; Izuku has a feeling it's not just to give him a break from training), All Might has started to dole out hair ruffles or pats on the back whenever he can. He even stands a little closer to him—the change isn't much, just a few inches, but it's enough for Izuku to note.

These changes made Izuku uncomfortable at first, only for a couple weeks. But now, having quite a lot of time to get used to it, he doesn't even think about it anymore.

It kind of scares Izuku how much he likes it.

He learns something else about All Might a few months into his training.

Izuku is busy writing down different moves he could use with *Boost* that could help him counter long range attacks when his arm starts to irritate him again. He was sparring with All Might just a half hour prior and stupidly got himself injured, resulting in a bruised arm from one of the hero's stronger punches. In All Might's defense, Izuku should have dodged it.

He saw the blow coming and still didn't move fast enough, so Izuku doesn't know why the man started belting out apologies and questions. Izuku is *fine,* and *no, I don't need a hospital, All Might, it's my fault, don't apologize!*

But while he convinced the man not to take him to the hospital—Izuku does *not* want his blood drawn by *anyone* for obvious reasons—All Might ended up forcing him to take an hour break.

It feels more like a time-out if Izuku is being honest, as he'd argued with the man about it for five minutes, trying to explain that he doesn't *need* a break when it was his own fault for being so slow and stupid. All Might was having none of that, however, and instead suggested taking the day off altogether as an alternative.

That shut Izuku up real quick.

So now he's brooding, still a little angry at himself for being so dumb and also a bit irritated at All Might for being annoying.

Izuku flips to his analysis page on Eraserhead, deciding to add a little

bit more on the theory he has about the hero's capture weapon and just *how the fuck it even works.*

Because seriously, that thing defies the laws of gravity! It shouldn't be able to do *half* the shit Eraserhead does with it. And it can't be because of the man's quirk, as capture weapons can be used by anyone with enough training and dedication.

There's the crunch of sand behind him, signaling his mentor's approach. "I say we do a bit of meditating after this, what do you say, my boy?"

Izuku grunts, not ready to forgive All Might for being the reason they're not still sparring right now.

"Hm. So who are you working on now?" The man leans over to peek at his notebook, letting out a noise of recognition. "Ah, is that Eraserhead?"

Huh?

Izuku twists around to stare at him, wide-eyed, suddenly forgetting about his previous anger toward the man. "How do you know his name? He works underground!"

"Well, he's my soon-to-be coworker, Young Midoriya! I met him a bit ago."

And what—what the actual *shit?*

"You're becoming a teacher!" His voice cracks on the last word, but Izuku doesn't let himself get too embarrassed by it. "Since when?"

The hero rubs at his neck, smiling. "I actually just completed the paperwork and interviews last week. The principal decided that having a hero with the experience that I do would be a great help in training the younger ones!"

And that—that actually makes sense, which infuriates Izuku, because that's honestly a *dumb* idea. The man only has a maximum of a few hours in his larger form, so how is he going to juggle both school and heroics?

Izuku stares out into the ocean, mind drawing up blank. All Might? Becoming a teacher?

He kind of wants to laugh and cry at the same time.

“What’s going on here, ladies?”

Izuku steps out of the shadows and grins at how quickly the criminal whips around, gun in hand.

“Who the hell are you?” Bitch Boy asks, just a tad bit shaky. He must be new at this. “And why’re you dressed like that?”

“You don’t know who I am? I won’t lie, I’m kind of offended.” Izuku gestures for the boy cowering in the corner to run. “I’m kind of famous around these parts nowadays.”

Bitch Boy is still holding up his weapon, pointing it at him with such bad form and posture that Izuku can’t help but cringe. Yep. He’s definitely new.

“Not much of a talker? How about you explain why you were sticking up that poor kid.”

That gets a reaction out of him. “I need money, you damn brat. Not everybody’s blessed with a rich mommy and daddy.”

Really? That’s your excuse?

Izuku merely tips his head. “Sure, but that doesn’t change the fact that you’re a criminal.”

“And you aren’t? You’re that vigilante, right? Everybody’s waiting to get a chance to beat your ass, y’know.”

“I do, actually. I have a very nice ass.”

Bitch Boy’s face turns disgusted in the faint light. “You sound twelve, why are you talking like that?”

“Twelve?” Izuku says abruptly, half shocked and half indignant. “I’ll

have you know that I am *not* a child. I'm just a late bloomer."

"Hmph. I don't care how old you are. You come any closer and I'm blowing you to pieces. You made me lose that kid's money."

Izuku wishes the man could see his smirk. "Don't threaten me with a good time, baby."

"Shut the hell up. Don't talk like that."

"Alright, here's the deal." Izuku turns serious, taking a few steps closer despite Bitch Boy's warning. "We both know you don't have the balls to actually pull that trigger. You look new, so I don't think you want a murder charge on you, amirite?"

He gets no reply, as expected.

Izuku continues, stopping only a yard away once the man's back hits the wall of the alley. "I get it, alright? I'm guessing you have to provide for your family, so I'll let you go this one time. Got it?"

Surprise flashes across Bitch Boy's face. "What?"

"I'm letting you go," Izuku repeats. "If I catch you threatening people again, however, I won't be so lenient. There's other ways to get money."

Like being a stripper, his brain helpfully inputs.

"Uh, thank you, I guess?"

"Yep." In one quick movement, Izuku darts forward and snatches the gun out of his hands, immediately moving back right afterwards in case the man decides to retaliate. "Just a quick word of advice, too: if you want to threaten someone with a weapon, make sure the safety is off first."

Izuku points to the safety on the firearm before beginning to unload it. Bitch Boy looks embarrassed, but also a little in awe. He's probably still shocked at how quickly Izuku snatched the gun from him.

"And by the way," the boy warns, "my fashion is well beyond *anyone's* understanding, so don't insult my costume ever again. I can make you *regret it."*

And with that he slides back into the shadows, mentally laughing as he stuffs the gun in his pocket after making sure it's empty. Man, one

of these days he just wants to say *I'm Batman* and see how many people get the reference.

The rest of his patrol goes by smoothly. There's not a lot of crime this time of week, so he can take his time tonight.

He stops after just a few more hours, when the moon is dipping low into the sky. It must be early in the morning by now.

The store should be open by now. He just got paid two days ago because of a few of his jobs, and he heard that the mini space heater he's been looking at is on sale this week. He should finally be able to afford it.

Izuku changes out of his Rabbit costume in a deserted alleyway, making sure the gun is still properly taken care of before stuffing it into his carry-on bag. He always keeps a change of clothes on him during weekend patrols.

It's when he's walking back onto the sidewalk, coming from the alley, when he hears something. Was that a *meow?*

A small shadow prances up to him, causing him to stop short. It's a cat, he realizes. It's fur is long and fluffy, a nice shade of black and white. It looks like a tuxedo cat. He doesn't know a lot about felines, but he knows that most tuxedos have green or yellow eyes, which this one has a mix of.

The streetlight above them allows Izuku to see that the cat's left eye is green while the other one is yellow. A rare sight, the boy thinks.

"Aren't you a lil cutie?"

The cat just meows, pawing at his sweatpants with both paws. It doesn't seem to wanna let him go.

Izuku giggles, reaching down to scratch behind its ears. It purrs, moving to run its head and body all over his legs.

So fucking adorable.

"Alright, cutie, I gotta go. So stay safe, okay?" He gives it another pat before moving on, but after a few seconds of walking the cat appears in front of him again. It's—it's *following* him? That's a first.

He can't help but give in, bending down to scratch the base of its tail.

That seems to really satisfy it, as it starts to purr even louder. There's no collar, so it's obviously a stray.

Homeless. I guess that makes two of us.

He sighs. "Fine. I guess you can tag along for a little bit. But just until I get to the store."

The entire way there the cat continues to do figure eights around his feet, occasionally meowing at him to reach down and pay attention to it. Each time he obeys, so he's not surprised at all when the cat suddenly jumps up and claws its way up onto his shoulder.

It crouches there, not at all perturbed by the change in height. Izuku smiles a little, not bothering to move the cat—a *she,* he realizes—off of him.

There's no one out and about right now, and for that he's grateful as he walks into the store he normally goes to.

One of the only workers at the moment, a tall, lanky boy who can't be any older than twenty, does a double take when he looks at him. "Hey, no pets allowed, kid. It says it on the sign outside."

"She's not my pet." Izuku says truthfully. "And besides, you don't get paid enough to care, so kindly screw off."

The boy just rolls his eyes and turns back to his magazine, proving Izuku's words right.

He heads straight for the mini space heater, lugging it over his free shoulder. He's about to be eating good from now on. Well, not *good,* but better.

He doesn't know why, but he ends up heading for the cat food after getting half a gallon of milk. He's glad that everything's on sale right now, otherwise he wouldn't be able to afford anything.

He glances at the name of the cheapest bag he can find: *Missy Cat Food! They're your family, so feed 'em like family!*

Izuku narrows his eyes, staring at the words for a moment before moving his eyes to the cat balancing on his shoulder. She kinda looks like the one on the cover of the bag.

"Hm. I'll call you Missy, alright?"

He picks up the bag and heads for the checkout, passing by the collar section. He won't buy one yet. He doesn't even know if the cat will stay for long. It's not like she's going to be his pet.

The cashier gives him another irritated look once he spots the feline, but Izuku just glares right back. He knows it's late, but that doesn't mean the dude can be a dick.

He pays for the stuff and heads home, Missy dutifully staying on her perch. They're not too far from his building, so it doesn't take long before he's walking up the many flights of stairs and nudging open his door. He watches as the cat jumps off of him and slinks inside to investigate the area.

"Well, this is the crib," Izuku announces, kicking the door shut and placing the stuff on the counter. "It's not much, but it's home."

I think that's how the saying goes.

The cat just meows at him and immediately takes claim to the top of the couch, making herself comfortable.

Izuku preens as he puts the milk in the fridge. Thank *god* his generator allows him a place to store his cold foods.

Turning back around, he finds Missy staring at him with those vibrant green and yellow eyes, laying flat on the couch pillows. She looks like a pancake, he muses.

And honestly, it hasn't set in yet that he practically just took in a cat. He's still too shocked and tired from his patrol.

He doesn't regret it, though.

Drugs are dangerous.

Logically, Izuku knows this. He isn't dumb. Just because he stopped *physically* going to school after his elementary years doesn't mean he's

not educated. His father made sure he got all the knowledge he needed through online classes and courses.

Technically speaking, Izuku doesn't even *have* to go high school since he's legally completed the required courses. In fact, he's been taking free online classes for college at the library. There's not much else to do besides patrolling, training, or going to the club and Kacchan's house, so why not get his diploma as a teenager?

He's stacked when it comes to education. He's certainly not dumb.

So again, he knows drugs are bad. He's gotten a firsthand account of how terrible they are since his vigilante counterpart has busted a whole lot of drug rings. Drugs can ruin people's lives, and even entire families and relationships.

It's not good. Not at all.

Now, if you do it safely, that's another thing. Izuku doesn't think drugs are bad if you don't misuse them. Only a small amount on certain occasions is completely fine, in Izuku's opinion. The only problem is that once you *start* drugs, a lot of times you can't *stop*.

And so here he is, sitting on top of a broken air conditioner with his eyebrows pinched in concentration as he studies the blunt in his hand.

Now, before you get the wrong idea—it's not his. And he's not going to smoke it, either.

It was given to him by one of his newer clients as evidence for this new case. Apparently a man has been going around and selling drugs to teenagers and young adults. Now this wouldn't be that bad or surprising at all (in Izuku's humble opinion) if the drugs weren't being laced.

Which means the weed he's been selling isn't *just* weed, it's mixed with much more dangerous drugs and chemicals that could really fuck someone up if smoked, and not in the good way.

His client, dubbed with the name Juicer, asked Izuku to take this job since he's been affected by the criminal personally. Apparently Juicer's niece paid for some simple drugs a week ago and ended up in the hospital for an overdose. She survived, thankfully, but only barely.

He takes a lighter out of his pocket and lights the blunt, watching it smolder before eventually starting to smoke up. He takes a quick, experimental sniff of it before busting out in coughs.

That smells fucking *terrible*—

"What the hell are you doing?"

Izuku startles so hard he nearly falls off the roof. He whirls around, eyes wide, lit blunt in hand, and suddenly realizes how bad this looks. "Eraser!" He pants, clutching at his chest. "What happened to warning me before doing that?"

And why are you even here? We just met yesterday.

Eraserhead ignores his complaint and instead stalks forward, capture weapon floating around his head along with his raven-black hair. He swipes the blunt from him and turns it over in his hand. His head snaps back up to face Izuku, who shivers involuntarily.

"Tell me you were *not* planning on smoking this!" The hero hisses, eyes flaring in warning.

"I was not planning on smoking this," Izuku deadpans.

"Rabbit."

"Okay, okay!" Izuku waves his hands in front of his body to placate the clearly fuming hero. "I'm not lying! I'm just studying it for this new job I got!"

Eraserhead's eye twitches. "Uh-huh."

Okay, what right does he have to get all upset with me? It's not his business even if *I was gonna smoke it!*

"And who are you to judge," Izuku says, crossing his arms. "You *look* like a stoner, so don't get on my ass for *holding* a blunt when you've probably smoked a whole lot more than this before."

The sudden snort he gets from the man seems to startle them both, and the short silence that follows the noise is incredibly awkward on both sides.

Hm. It seems Eraserhead is capable of being awkward after all.

The hero huffs something between a sigh and another laugh, shaking

his head. “Fair enough, kid. Fair enough.”

And *woah*, there’s no way Izuku was actually right about the stoner part. Who knew Eraserhead of all people used to do weed? And still probably does!

Eraserhead wets his fingers and puts out the lit part, making sure to blow gently into the chamber to get all the smoke out. Probably so the weed doesn’t get stale, Izuku thinks.

Don’t ask how he knows that.

Yep. Eraser has definitely done this before if he knows how to do it so well.

“I assume a client gave you this job?” The hero asks, cutting off the boy’s thoughts.

“Yep. He said this dude’s been running around and selling dangerous drugs to kids that don’t know any better.”

Eraserhead quirks an eyebrow at him. “How’d you get one of his blunts?”

He says it as if he expects the boy to say he bought it himself, which is highly unfair and a little pretentious of him to assume. It’s not like Izuku can afford to buy drugs anyway.

“How’d you get the blunt,” Izuku mocks. “My client gave it to me, thank you. Apparently Mr. Dealer dropped it at his last spot, so this is the only piece of evidence I’ve got so far. I just wanted to examine it to see what it’s been laced with; that’s why I lit it.”

“You know what he looks like?”

Izuku rubs his hands up and down his arms to protect against the chilly breeze. “I’ve got an idea. I think he’s got a mental quirk, too, so I’ve been on edge trying to look out for him.”

The hero hums in acknowledgement. “Any recent sightings of him?”

“Only one, and I’ve already combed that area. He’s nowhere to be seen. His patterns are making me think he’s got another dealing tonight, though, so I’ve gotta find him before he does something else.”

There’s a few moments of silence in which the hero seems to think about his next course of action. Finally, once Izuku has decided that

he's gonna make a rude joke to piss the man off, he speaks.

"Fine." Eraserhead pockets the blunt, ignoring the offended look Izuku throws him. "We can look for him together."

No way.

Izuku perks up immediately. "You mean like on a patrol? With *you?"*

"Only if you can keep up."

And then the hero takes off, already clearing the jump before them and landing on the next roof. Izuku is quick to follow, laughing as the wind whips at his face. "Is this a race then?"

"It's not a race if you already know who's gonna win, kid."

The words are almost lost to the boy, but it's clear he's not talking about Izuku being the winner. The boy gasps dramatically, doing a flip before he hits the next ledge. "How dare you!"

Eraserhead is fast, and he may have his capture weapon to help him maneuver around, but Izuku isn't called Rabbit for nothing.

He powers up a little more energy into his legs and starts using the balls of his feet to spring even farther forward. He's practically bouncing, or maybe he should call it *aggressive hopping.*

It's the fastest he can go without using too much of his energy storage, and it's just enough to keep in pace with the hero. Eraserhead plays dirty, it seems. He continuously jerks in front of Izuku when the boy is about to overtake him, but Izuku is used to this kind of treatment. Kacchan doesn't like to lose either.

Izuku is in tune with all kinds of dirty tricks and methods used for victory, so he can just about avoid anything that comes his way.

The hero-and-vigilante duo stop petty crime along the way, just simple muggings and assaults, and Izuku comes to learn that he likes fighting alongside Eraserhead.

He likes seeing how the man fights. He's only ever seen shaky camera footage of his battles, so he's never been able to get a good analysis down on him. Now is his chance.

But of course, if Izuku is using this time to get more info on the other, then so is Eraserhead. It works both ways.

The hero probably *knew* that this would happen, and yet he still offered to do this with him.

Wow. He isn't joking about the whole trust thing. He *wants* Izuku to trust him.

Izuku counts that as a leap in the right direction.

His senses alert him to multiple quirks up ahead, and Izuku comes to a rolling halt, making Eraserhead swerve to the side to avoid crashing into him. Izuku just raises a finger to his mask-covered lips and points to the alley below them.

There's three people down there. One of them, the one on the far right, is holding out a bag full of what looks like edibles. Edibles that are probably *laced.*

The two buyers, one girl and a boy that look to be around the same age, are fumbling around with some cash. It's obvious that they're probably friends with each other and only came here to have a good time.

They must not know who exactly they're buying from, or they do and they're just under the influence of a quirk.

The criminal looks incredibly anxious. His movements are jerky and his hands twitch ever so slightly under the light of his phone flashlight. He's either high or he's just a piece of shit. Could be both, Izuku reckons. He also has a feeling that it's *him.*

If he's being honest, Izuku expected more. For all that talk and growing reputation, he kind of wanted some real action. Something not as *pathetic* as what the upcoming fight will most surely turn out to be.

Eraserhead is already peeking down and taking stock of the situation, fingers deftly moving across his phone keyboard at the same time. Probably sending out a signal to any nearby cops.

So cool, Izuku fanboys.

"Which one is he?" Eraserhead mumbles, voice low so only Izuku can hear it.

"The one on the right."

“You said his quirk can mess with your mind, so it’s best if I deal with him. You make sure the other two are okay.”

And with that the hero is preparing himself to jump down, one hand on the edge and the other gripping his capture weapon. There’s no time for Izuku to argue that *I could’ve handled him just fine, but okay,* as the man is already dropping down below.

Izuku does as instructed and drops to the floor, wincing at the screams he gets from both older teenagers. They’re obviously delirious, either under the influence or just in a state of shock, and Izuku tries to calm them down while also blocking them from view in case something bad happens.

Though that doesn’t seem likely, as when Izuku turns around the criminal is already being subdued by Eraserhead.

The underground hero has the man pinned on the floor, expression remaining bored even as the criminal starts struggling and bucking wildly to escape.

Confident that the dealer won’t come near them, Izuku turns back to the teens, who have fortunately not yet made a move to run. “Heya,” he starts coolly. “Y’all good?”

No reply, just blank stares. Well great. This makes things a bit more difficult.

He leans closer and notices that their pupils are dilated, which tells him that they’re *definitely* under the influence of a quirk. This has to be the guy they’re after.

“You said you think you know what he looks like,” Eraserhead calls to him from where he’s busy tying the criminal up, “so go take a look at him. I’ll check them.”

They switch roles, Eraserhead moving to get what’s probably a better diagnosis of the teens than what Izuku was heading towards and Izuku going to get a better identification of the drug dealer.

With black hair and even darker eyes to match, said drug dealer *looks* scary. Now Izuku isn’t one to judge, but he’d definitely think this man was a serial killer if he ever saw him out in public.

Peeking closer, Izuku sees a small tattoo on the inside of his wrist. It’s faded and kind of hard to see in the faint light, so the boy quickly

takes a picture of it to study later. Who knows what it might lead to.

But other than that, Izuku recognizes him immediately. He was just reading about this guy on the police forums last night. He has multiple warrants out for him, all due to drug use and violating probation. And, if Izuku isn't mistaken, a pedophilia charge.

I should light his shoes on fire, just to scare him. Somehow, though, I don't think Mr. Pro Hero over there will like that idea so much.

"His name is Sugita Teruo," Izuku says sourly. "He's already got a bad criminal record."

Eraserhead side eyes him from where he's standing guard by the two teens. "You just know that off the top of your head?"

"Call it a lucky guess," Izuku says cryptically. "He's got a quirk that can make his victims gullible. Or, should I say, *more easily swayed.* He can spin any lie off of his tongue and they'll believe it."

"I'm assuming that's how he gets his buyers to trust him so easily. He looks sketchy, so I find it hard to believe that anyone would buy drugs off of him otherwise."

Izuku tightens the restraints once more, making sure it's not enough to completely cut off circulation. "Yep! He's also a child toucher."

There's a choke. "I'm sorry, a *what?"*

"A child toucher." Izuku faces him with a frown. "Y'know, a pedophile?"

Eraserhead stares at him for a solid five seconds before blinking. "Kid, you're something else."

I know.

Izuku finishes the last knot and hauls the squirming criminal to his feet. "Welp. He's all yours."

The hero takes the struggling man from Izuku's hold and wraps him up in his own capture weapon as an added measure. The sirens and lights get closer, reflecting off the windows in the stores across the street.

Eraserhead gives him a meaningful look then. "Good night, Rabbit."

Now that's a dismissal if Izuku's ever heard one. The boy merely grins despite knowing the hero can't see it. "We should do this more often, Eraser. That was kinda fun!"

Eraserhead snorts. "I'll think about it, kid. Now scram before the police get here."

Izuku doesn't need to be told twice. He waves goodbye to the delirious teens before scrambling up the side of the building and disappearing into the night.

Missy is waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

1

no other way

Chapter Notes

y'all I love you guys so much!! 20k hits??? dsfgdfhghjghk

Present Mic's birthday is the seventh! so happy birthday dadmic!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku understands villains.

Not to say that he endorses them or encourages them, he just *understands* them.

He knows that not everyone starts out with an advantage in life, that not everyone is loved or blessed enough to have a good family or wealth behind their name. He knows the world is unfair. He knows this, but instead of making it easier to deal with criminals and villains, this knowledge makes it *harder*.

Because now he feels bad about taking them in or stopping them. Of course, he doesn't feel bad about the murderers and rapists. *They* still *have* a choice. There's no excuse for those kinds of people. He's talking about the ones like the guy he let go a little while ago. The ones who feel like they *have* to steal or break the law to survive, or to provide for their family.

Izuku understands because technically he *is* one of those people. He's a criminal. He goes out as a vigilante and hurts people to get a paycheck and survive. Having good intentions doesn't change the fact that what he's doing is illegal.

So again, he feels bad when it comes to stuff like that because he knows what it's like.

Now, Bitch Boy shouldn't have threatened a civilian with a gun for his own personal benefit or gain, no matter the reasoning behind it. That much is obvious. Stealing is bad when it's from someone who needs it just as much, if not more than you do.

Now, if you're stealing from the *rich*...

Izuku does that whenever he gets the chance. While it's still bad and hella illegal, he gets a lot of joy from it. He loves watching his next

victim's—ahem, *billionaire's* face from a distance once they realize their cash is missing from their pocket. They never usually care that much, as the cash they carry around is nothing more than chump change to them.

Again, doesn't make it right, but still. He doesn't stop people for that. It would be hypocritical of him to do so since he literally does the same thing.

Izuku can't help but be a little disappointed, though. Criminals and villains are still human, so they deserve to get a little compassion and sympathy as long as they haven't done anything too bad. But their skills, their drive, their quirks—it's kind of a waste.

They could be using all of that for good, to help the people who can't help themselves. To save people, to make them feel safe and happy, to be a *hero.* And yet those criminals throw away all of those opportunities for whatever reason.

Different quirks and skill sets can prove to be vital in certain environments. Take the drug dealer he and Eraserhead took down for example. His quirk would've been useful in law enforcement. Or for a negotiator, either in a hostage situation or just to talk down a civilian from making a bad choice. It would've proved useful in rescue missions, as Sugita could convince civilians to trust him and do as he says to escape without hesitating.

The ability to spin any lie off your tongue and have everybody believe it? Izuku could use that power. He *wanted* it, even when he was standing an entire floor above the guy. His skin had been *itching* to take that quirk.

It would've been *oh so useful* to Izuku.

He could use it defensively, to lie his way out of a confrontation or to diffuse a possibly harmful situation. It could also help offensively to get a villain or hero on his side. If trust is forcibly made, information will slip out, giving Izuku the advantage.

There's so many possibilities, and yet the owner of the quirk chose to waste it on convincing young adults to buy his shitty drugs. It's almost kind of funny.

His quirk is powerful, almost overwhelmingly so. Simplicity gives way to complexity when you allow other variables to get involved, and that's just what Izuku would've done had he been in possession of said

quirk. But it's unfair to say that Izuku himself wanted it. *Extract* was practically begging him to take it when he got closer to the drug dealer. It's like it was *calling* to him.

Extract does that to just about all the quirks he comes across or interacts with, though he's gotten used to pushing it aside and ignoring it. He's already made a promise to himself that he'd never steal anyone's power, no matter their villainous stature or ranking. That would make him just as much a villain as the guy he's taking it from.

Now, mutant quirks don't have the same appeal to Izuku, as a lot of times he wouldn't be able to steal them even if he wanted to. He can still feel their power, but he can't take them. It's like a tease, in a way. One that he in equal parts hates and enjoys.

There are more quirks that stick out to him, not just the drug dealer's. Eraserhead's, for one thing, is pretty strong for such a simple sounding power. Like the previous one, Erasure has a lot of opportunities and advantages that come with it, especially given the fact that it can erase the quirks of multiple people at once.

(Whether or not it can erase multiple quirks belonging to one person is a question that Izuku hasn't had the chance to figure out yet. He has to find a way to try it without Eraserhead realizing it.)

But none of the quirks he's encountered so far have felt as good as One for All does.

It sounds weird, now that he thinks about it. How a quirk can *feel* good to him when in reality it's just a flow of energy spreading throughout his veins that in all senses *shouldn't* be having such an effect on him.

And that scares Izuku, how much he likes it, because he knows why he can't have it—literally and figuratively. It's just not meant to happen, and nor would Izuku ever *dream* of doing that to the hero.

It's wrong, it's villainous, it's *dangerous.* And Izuku wishes above all else that *Extract* would stop making him feel so bad for thinking about it when he can't even control it.

Speaking of heroes.

"Hey!"

Eraserhead shoves him out of the way of a stray bullet, darting forward to slam the shooter against the wall and knock him out of the fight.

This jolts Izuku out of his thoughts and brings him back into the fray.

Oh, right. We're in the middle of a gang war.

Izuku grabs the nearest person and throws them into their partner, leveling them both with a flying kick to their chests that sends them flying into an open dumpster. Izuku uses *Pull* to yank the lid down on their heads, effectively knocking them out.

He's confident no one is paying too much attention to him to realize the oddities of his quirks.

The air crackles behind him and he ducks, narrowly avoiding the jolt of blue electricity that scours the space he was just previously occupying.

See what Izuku means? That's a powerful quirk right there, and yet this gangbanger is using it to fight his own pointless battles.

A gray scarf flies from out of nowhere and wraps around the criminal, yanking them back around to meet Eraserhead's fist.

Damn. What a way to go.

It's not long before both gangs are finished, their members either unconscious and lying on the ground or sitting up against the wall and grumbling about *these fucking third parties always ruining shit.*

Everyone is down, it looks like. No escapees, either, so that's a plus.

"Well, that was exciting," Izuku pants, turning around for privacy. He pulls down his mask to just above his mouth, wiping at the steady stream of crimson leaking from his nose from a lucky hit. He'd rather *not* drown in his own blood, thanks. The mask allows oxygen to pass through its material, thank god, but it doesn't do anything for substances as thick as his blood.

Izuku should really find a way to fix that one of these days.

"The hell was that?" Eraserhead asks from behind him. He sounds angry, and when Izuku turns around to look at him, mask pulled back up, he sees that the man's arms are crossed. "That bullet was heading

straight for your head, kid. If I hadn't intercepted, there's no telling what would've happened to you."

Izuku doesn't know what to say to that. "Uh, thank you?"

"You should be paying more attention to your surroundings. You can't afford to be careless in the middle of a fight, Rabbit."

Izuku frowns, a little offended and also a little embarrassed. "I know that! I made one mistake, that doesn't make me *dumb."*

"Didn't say you were," the man counters evenly. "You're usually quicker than that. You've dodged bullets before, so this time shouldn't have been different. Pay attention next time."

The boy mutters an apology under his breath and watches as Eraserhead makes his way farther back into the alley, probably to check that the criminals there are still unconscious.

Or to get away from Izuku. That sounds likely, too.

Great. The boy was having a good night, too, and he just had to ruin it with his own mess of a mind. Now Eraserhead is upset with him.

He probably thinks you're stupid.

Izuku kindly tells that voice at the back of his head to shut the fuck up. He's known the hero long enough to at least be confident that he doesn't think that. Not yet, at least.

There's a snigger to his left, and Izuku glares at the gang member that's sitting up against the wall, sporting a busted lip and black eye. Izuku assumes he got it from fighting one of his rivals, as he and Eraserhead make sure not to use brute force on someone to subdue them. Only when necessary.

"What are you laughing at?" Izuku asks.

The criminal grins, which is a nice change of pace from all the snarling and yelling from earlier. "Is he like your dad or something? Didn't think a hero and vigilante would team up for something like a gang fight."

"Hah?" The boy says loudly, channeling his inner Kacchan. "No, he's not my dad. Why would you even think that?"

He gets a shrug in return. "You're getting defensive, there, son."

Son? Why the fuck—why? The guy doesn't look any older than twenty-five, so why is he calling Izuku *son*.

"Just how young do you guys think I am?" Izuku says, very much exasperated. "I'm not a child."

"You sound like a child."

"I'm *not.*"

"Prove it."

Izuku kicks a pebble at him, only getting angrier when it harmlessly bounces off the guy's cheek. "I don't have to do anything. You're a criminal, stop talking. You have no rights."

The dude chuckles again. "Okay, son."

Son of a bitch.

"What were you guys fighting over anyways?" Izuku tries to distract himself from his growing frustration. He's not really frustrated at the child thing, more at Eraserhead.

"Ah, the other gang stole my friend's dog."

Izuku blinks, because this sounds suspiciously like a John Wick movie. "That's... that's interesting."

"Yep." The guy fiddles with his hands, not exactly struggling to get out of the restraints on his wrists. "Also, can I have my gun back?"

Izuku turns on him. "So *you're* the one who tried to shoot me!"

"Yo, chill, it's not like I meant to aim at your head. I was going for you foot."

"My—my foot?" Izuku is incredulous. "There's literally no way you accidentally shot at my head while aiming for my *foot.* That's on two ends of my body."

"Never said I was a good shot."

Izuku sighs and sits on the dirty ground in the middle of the alley, watching the rest of the criminals until the police arrive. "Whatever. You guys will probably get out on bond since none of you have actually harmed any civilians."

“Sweet.” There’s a moment of silence before the guy speaks again. "Hey, you're pretty cool for a vigilante. I thought you'd be a douche like all the others."

The boy smiles, and he’s surprised to find that it’s genuine. “Thank you. Not a lot of people have said that to me.”

“Sure. Now can I have my gun now?”

Izuku laughs. “That’s not gonna happen. And besides, the cops are gonna take it anyway. If you’re caught with an illegal firearm you’ll have a harder time in court, so just pretend it’s not yours. I won’t snitch.”

Can’t say the same for Mr. Pay Attention Next Time, though.

“Aight, cool. How long until they get here?”

Before Izuku can tell him that he’s not sure, Eraserhead comes back out of the shadows with his hair raised and eyes glowing. Izuku guesses he’s currently erasing somebody’s quirk to keep them from escaping.

“Stop making friends with the criminals,” the hero says, though the amused tilt to his voice contradicts his words. “The police will be here any minute.”

He directs the last part towards Izuku, who rolls his eyes but dutifully gets up, shooting his new friend a glance. “I’ve gotta hide for a bit. If you don’t snitch on me being here, we won’t snitch on you about the gun. Sound good?”

“‘Course, son.”

“I swear to god.”

Izuku has never been in this part of town before, at least not at this

time of night. His patrol routes usually start on the outskirts of the city and slowly make their way inwards, so he tends to miss certain areas.

Eraserhead is crouching on the side of the roof, silently watching a cop place quirk suppressants on a robber. He's probably making sure everything goes smoothly.

"Can I ask you a question?"

The words escape his mouth before he can stop them. Izuku stares out into the streets on the other side of the roof, mentally cataloguing every crook and cranny to a folder in his mind. Who knows when he might have to lay low in this area of the city. It's better to be familiar with his surroundings than end up in a bad position later on.

"What is it, kid?"

Izuku turns and slowly makes his way towards the man, hands rubbing up and down his arms at the cold breeze. The thin fabric of his costume isn't always enough for Japan's nightly weather. It's been a few days since the gang fight, and with each passing night the rooftops seem to only get chillier.

"Did you notice that I was injured the night you first talked to me?"

His words are quiet, but Eraserhead must hear it well enough because in the next second he's straightening up, hair whipping at his face as his neck snaps around to look at him. "What?"

"I got shot during the warehouse incident."

"Kid," Eraserhead trails off for a few moments before turning around fully to stare at him. "You were shot? As in, you had a *bullet* in your body?"

Izuku blinks. "That's what being shot means, yeah. And why do you sound so surprised? If I didn't waste my energy trying not to pass out while bleeding from the stomach, I wouldn't have been so easy to overrun. You wouldn't have caught me."

The man is deadly silent. Izuku doesn't like the expression that settles on his face. There's something there that he can't quite place, and he doesn't like it one bit.

When he speaks, Izuku has to lean forward to hear him over the wind.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

The words are uncharacteristically soft. Izuku can’t tell if it’s from shock of the situation or from some other emotion. Either way, the boy starts to feel his lips curl downwards.

“Uh, I was under the impression that you’d capture me if I made a wrong move? If I told you I was injured I thought you’d bring me to the hospital and lock me up.”

Would you still do that, I wonder?

Eraserhead lets out a sigh. “How did you get it out? The bullet?”

Izuku shivers at the reminder. He thinks of alcohol and blood and *Pull.* Thinks of crescents being pressed into the palm of his free hand, leaving behind drops of crimson. He can already taste the iron in his mouth.

“My doctor was unavailable at the time, so I had to improvise.” It’s not a lie. It was too late at night to drag himself to the doctor at the Club. “It was, uh, *unpleasant,* to say the least.”

Eraserhead crosses the few steps between them and places a heavy hand on his shoulder, eyes suddenly very intense. “Listen, kid. If you get injured, I need you to tell me. I don’t care what time it is, alright? You have my number, so use it.” He shakes Izuku just a little bit with his hand. “I have people who can help you. They’ll keep their mouth shut about your identity.”

And that’s... not quite what Izuku expected. A lump forms in the boy’s throat, and he swallows it back before speaking. “Thank you. I’ll, uh, keep that in mind.”

The hand retracts from his shoulder, and it goes back inside the depths of the hero’s pocket. “What brought this on?”

“Um, I guess I just got reminded of it the other day.” Izuku continues at Eraserhead’s raised eyebrow: “When I almost got shot.”

“Makes sense.”

Izuku nods, scuffing his feet against the gravel. He doesn’t know what else to say, still stuck on the feeling of the man’s hand on his shoulder, so he falls silent, hoping the other will break the awkward air soon.

He doesn't have to wait long before the hero is suddenly shaking his head. "I'm sorry you had to go through that alone, Rabbit. I shouldn't have made you feel like you had to. That's a failure on my part."

Izuku's stomach clenches at the apology. He doesn't like it. The hero shouldn't be the one apologizing, not at all, especially since he's already apologized for his previous shortcomings regarding the warehouse incident. "It's not your fault, Eraser, I hid it from you. And it's not like you seeing it would've changed anything, so we can just forget it never happened."

"You can't," Eraserhead counters. "Not when it probably left you with a nasty scar without proper treatment."

I wouldn't be able to forget it even if it didn't leave a mark.

Izuku tries to sound upbeat and ultimately fails. "Eh, I'm used to scars."

The hero gives him a weird look but doesn't ask for an elaboration, not that he would've gotten one had he asked.

School has been out for a while now. The break is a breath of fresh air for Izuku, despite the fact that Izuku doesn't even physically go to school. His online classes are finished for now, which means he's one year closer to his college diploma.

He gets to hang out with Kacchan more often, which is always nice. The explosive teen graduated middle school at the top of his class—no surprise there, Izuku thinks. His friend has always been super studious, even without Izuku's own encouragement or input.

Izuku is back to losing on terms of their wrestling, though. The more free time they have to spend around each other, the more often Kacchan can fight him at seemingly random times and even more random places. Izuku doesn't think he can ever forget how Kacchan

jumped him at the back of a Denny's parking lot that one time.

That was peculiar, to say the least, and also quite scary. At first, Izuku thought that it was the local crackhead trying to rob him instead of his friend, so you can imagine his surprise and bemusement when he was promptly *judo-flipped* by his attacker. Yeah. Not something a normal crackhead would know how to do.

But whatever. Izuku won that fight, anyways, seeing as he knows the Denny's parking lot terrain like the back of his own hand. Not that it matters much in the long run since they keep trading places in their competition.

One day Izuku is in the lead and the next they're at a tie. It happens over and over again, but it never gets old.

They're evenly matched, much to Kacchan's irritation. The teen tries everything he can to make Izuku use his other quirks, and most of the time, Izuku indulges him.

But on those days, the ones where Izuku can't even think straight for fear of falling into that bottomless pit in his mind, he can barely force himself to use even his basic enhancements. The memories attached to *all* of his quirks are sharp and studded, and every time he thinks of them, the more scars they leave on his brain.

Kacchan knows that. But he continues to push. Izuku thinks that that's the *only* thing his friend will never stop fighting him over.

Izuku is going shopping today. It's not too chilly out, not like it's been these past few days, and he's just returned from his trip to the Club to receive his recent paychecks.

It's not much, but Izuku's been saving up enough to at least get some more food and supplies.

The mini heater he bought works *amazingly*. He uses the pots left over from the last tenant (from around a decade or so ago, don't judge him) to cook basic foods. Now he doesn't have to eat raw ramen and cold coffee. It runs on solar power and/or batteries, so he leaves it on the roof during the day and at night he can cook whatever he's got for him and Missy.

And Missy has made herself quite at home at the apartment. He's gotta buy her some actual toys so she'll stop tearing up the walls and furniture. Not that Izuku minds—everything is already torn up, but he

doesn't want it to look like they live in a pigsty. Even though he technically *does* live in one of the poorest neighborhoods. He lives in a fucking abandoned building for god's sake.

But it's whatever. He's finally got enough money to buy some of the stuff he's been looking at, so now he walks through the pet store, skimming the aisles for a clearance section. He doesn't know *shit* about cat toys, so he enlists help from one of the workers to inform him on the best brands.

Izuku makes sure to ignore the suspicious looks from the other workers (that's what he gets for looking so homeless; Kacchan's hand-me-down clothes are always a little big on him), and thanks the woman for her kindness. He picks up his stuff and checks out, thinking about how excited Missy will be when she sees what he bought her.

He really hopes she doesn't dislike the toys. While he does love cats, he's not very knowledgeable on them. He knows the basics, like how many different breeds there are, and also on their allergies and *do's* and *don't's.*

But again, not on what they like. You can't group an entire species into one category, so Izuku guesses that knowing it wouldn't help anyway, but still. He'll just have to find out.

The worst case scenario is she turns her nose up to all of the toys and Izuku has to donate them to a cat shelter. A few bucks gone, but what can you do?

His extra money is giving him the chance to upgrade his weapons and such. He's already bought more bombs and knives, saying as he lost a few of each during a raid. Now he wants to finish that AI he made for himself.

It's nothing special, just a simple piece of coding that'll help him keep track of things during missions and have access to the internet without having his phone on him. He's thinking of making the AI have a female voice, maybe with an Australian accent or something. That would be funny.

The technologies shop isn't far from where he is, so he arrives relatively quickly to buy some stuff. He's already got the programming down for the AI, he just needs something to incorporate it into. He's thinking about making it into an armband on his wrist or something, that way he can easily transport it and have it on him at all times.

He kind of wants to extend the AI to his own home and have it run security measures while he's gone. Besides, it'd be nice to have somebody to talk to, even if it's a program.

He gets the parts he's missing and walks out with his hands full of bags. Today's been productive. Hopefully he can keep it that way.

He steps out onto the road, planning to cross the street to get home to Missy, when a few shouts up the street make him pause, glancing up from his phone.

A car is barreling down the road at what looks like twice the maximum speed limit, and it doesn't look like it has any intention of stopping, even as people jump out of the way and shout at it.

Izuku quickly steps back, nose crinkling.

Dumbass bitch. Could kill someone going that fast. I have the right of way here, too—

"Mommy, look! A butterfly!"

In this moment, Izuku is pretty sure that the universe hates him. Because it *has* to be him. It *has* to happen when he's here, huh?

A little girl, looking no older than six years old, is crossing the road, chasing a pretty black moth. The little girl doesn't know that it's not actually a butterfly, as she's still happily trying to capture it, and she also doesn't seem to notice the car coming straight toward her without any means of slowing down.

Her mother does, though. She's still on the sidewalk, and Izuku watches as her carefree face morphs into one of horror. She starts to rush forward, arms outstretched and mouth open in a yell.

But she won't be quick enough. Izuku can see this. He can just *tell,* even without doing the math. Hell, not even *Pull* would be quick enough to yank the girl out of the way at the rate the car is going.

Nobody else is near her. Nobody else will be quick enough.

And so that's what sparks him to move. It happens in the blink of an eye. In one instant, he's dropping his bags onto the sidewalk, thoughts going a million miles per second as he thinks of a plan, and in the next he's in the middle of the street, legs burning, scooping the girl into his arms. He moves so she's cradled against his body, facing away from

the approaching vehicle, hand outstretched as added protection—and there's not nearly enough time to get out of the way as the car hits them head on.

They both go flying, and Izuku holds onto the girl tight as they roll a few times, tucking her face into his chest to try and protect her from touching the ground or getting scraped.

Izuku closes his eyes somewhere in the middle of it, and when he opens them, he's flat on his back and looking up at the sky. The girl is wriggling in his grasp and wailing, tears flowing down her face. His vision is suddenly sluggish, his hearing like it's underwater.

There's more screaming and yelling, and faces pop up in his vision. Incoherent words reach his ears, and Izuku blinks against the light in his eyes.

The girl is yanked off of him and into the arms of her mother. There's not a scrape on the child, at least from what Izuku can see.

A group of people hover over him, mouths moving around more sentences and questions that Izuku can't quite hear, because *fuck* his head is pounding. He just got hit by a goddamn car going *forty-five miles per hour*.

That's—that's a lot of force. Izuku isn't awake enough to figure out how much it is exactly.

Someone touches his body, as if to get his attention, and the pain explodes in Izuku's shoulder and arm, so sudden and excruciating that the inside of his cheek tears when he bites down on it to keep from screaming out.

Fuck, is it broke? His entire body hurts. His shoulder feels like it's been dislocated, so that's an easy fix. But his arm? What happened to his arm? He cranes his neck to try and see but hands gently push him back down.

The world comes into his view sharply, all his senses too sensitive, too loud. The mother is crying and blubbering out *thank you's* off to the side while simultaneously scolding her daughter for running out into the street in the first place. She's apologizing to Izuku with the girl still held in her arms.

She's safe. The girl isn't hurt. She's alive.

Someone's on the phone, probably calling the cops or the ambulance.

Where did the driver go? Izuku can see the car from where it crashed into a pole after hitting Izuku and the girl, but the car door is open with nobody inside.

Ambulance. The meaning hits him hard.

"Nuh," he groans, struggling to sit up against the hands pushing him down. "'M good, I don' need a h'sp'tal."

"Son, stay down. You're injured! You gotta—"

Izuku uses his good arm to weakly push the offender away, blinking away the spots dotting at the corners of his vision. He's fine, he has to be. He can't feel his arm anymore, sure, but he can't go to the hospital. He just can't.

He mutters some more of this as the crowd grows. There's police sirens in the distance, and his struggling increases. "Lemme go, 's all good. I c'n't do h'sp'tal's, gotta—"

A cat's face pops into view. Izuku squints at it. *Cathead?* Is that his officer buddy?

Another push down, and then the world sways. He slips into a void of darkness with fluffy cats on his mind.

When Izuku wakes up, the first thing he does is panic.

Because this—this looks like a fucking hospital. White walls, a computer next to him, the smell of antiseptic—it's like he's in a nightmare.

Oh *fuck.* He told them, he *begged* them not to take him to a hospital, and yet here he is.

He shoots up in the bed, eyes wide and frantic. He still has his sweatpants on, but his sweater—*Kacchan's* old sweater—is gone, exposing the torn undershirt he has on. A thin blanket covers his top half, and when he moves he realizes his arm is bandaged.

So it *was* broken. It doesn't hurt as much now, but the relief doesn't stop the panic from setting in. This is bad. There are *doctors* here. They could find him out.

He tosses the blanket off of him and moves off the bed, stumbling to the ground immediately. He instinctively reaches out to grab something to stop his fall, only to forget that his arm is useless right now.

He crashes onto the tiles, arm now throbbing in pain, and scrambles to the door handle a few feet away. He uses it to slide to his feet, jerking it open to run because he *can't stay here, I'm going to get killed, I have to leave before—*

He gets a face full of black fabric when he shoots forward after opening the door. Izuku is on the defensive immediately, free hand coming up to shove whoever's in front of him, but strong fingers grab his wrist and hold him in that spot.

Izuku tries to jerk away, but the man is strong. The figure steps back and the boy freezes, his heart dropping to his toes.

"Eraserhead?"

Raised eyebrows, a tight frown, but the grip on Izuku's wrist doesn't lighten one bit. "Why are you up?"

Izuku just stares at him, mouth agape. His gaze flicks to the side, realizing that this doesn't look like a hospital anymore. Is this—no. This looks like the inside of the police station.

His mind instantly goes to the worst possibility, but before he can make sense of it all Eraserhead is leading him back into the room, and Izuku surprisingly lets him.

"You should be resting," the hero chides. "A nurse should be by soon to check on you again before you can go."

Izuku is pushed back onto the bed, and he watches as Eraserhead moves to stand by the door with a tired expression. Probably to make sure he won't try to run again. "Why am I here, sir?"

He means how. How the hell did he get here?

“Sansa was close to the scene when the cops were called. He managed to convince them to let him take you to the hospital.” The black-haired man rests his head against the doorframe. “He brought you here instead.”

Izuku is a little confused. “Sansa?”

“The officer with the cat’s face,” Eraserhead explains. He levels the boy with a look. “He also told me that you didn’t *want* to go to a hospital.”

“Uh, yeah.” The boy has a feeling he’s done something wrong. “That’s true.”

“Why? You broke your arm. You were lucky to even survive the impact, so there was no telling what else was wrong with you. It would’ve been illogical to not receive medical attention.”

He sounds just like he did when he told me to call him if I ever got injured.

In Izuku’s opinion, that’s an *unfair* question to ask. He doesn’t know how to respond, so he settles for a half-truth. “I can’t afford a hospital. They would’ve made me go, even though I wouldn’t have been able to pay for it.

And that *really* says something about Izuku’s situation, since Japanese citizens only have to pay thirty percent of their medical bills while the government pays for the remaining seventy percent. The boy is sure Eraserhead is judging him at least a little bit right now.

“Hm,” the hero says disinterestedly. “Your father can’t afford it? Didn’t you say he works a lot?”

Rude, Izuku thinks. *And also, how does he remember me saying that? That was the very first time we met.*

“That’s not something you say to someone,” he says cautiously, making sure he sounds slightly off-put. He doesn’t want to be disrespectful, but if he can get the man to back off, then maybe it’ll be easier to avoid his questions. “And we have money, I just don’t want to waste it on something so... trivial, I guess.”

The man studies him for a moment before letting out a noncommittal noise. Izuku briefly wonders why the hero’s *here,* of all places, talking

to *him.* Doesn't he have somewhere more important to be?

"Well, it's a good thing the team here is paid fully by the government. You don't owe a dime for this."

What? Izuku glances up, ignoring the small burst of pain that shoots up his arm at the movement. "Really?"

Eraserhead doesn't reply, not willing to waste breath on a dumb question.

The boy is used to it, though. *That's why Cathead took me here, he knew I couldn't afford a hospital. I have to thank him next time I see him.*

An awkward feeling settles in the air. Again, only for Izuku. Eraserhead looks more comfortable in silences.

"So, uh, why are *you* here?"

"Tsukauchi called to tell me to keep an eye on you. I'm waiting for the nurse to come in."

It's such a blunt statement that Izuku feels himself flushing. Of fucking *course* the detective said that. He knows about his distaste for doctors more than anyone. "Oh, wow. Sorry, I guess?"

As usual, there's a grunt of acknowledgment. If Izuku didn't know any better, he'd assume the hero is falling asleep.

"Eraserhead? Can I ask—"

"It's Aizawa when I'm off-duty."

"Oh." Izuku already knew his name, but okay. "Do you have any cats?"

"Yes."

Interesting.

Izuku subconsciously struggles against the sudden thought to kick the man in the shin as he continues. "How many?"

"Too many."

He laughs a little, still tense. "Are you excited for the new school year?"

“As much as I can be,” he mutters, looking at Izuku with one eye now. “My turn. Why did you run in front of that car?”

Izuku stops short, only to speak once he realizes Eraserhead won’t continue without an answer. “What do you mean? The little girl was in the middle of the road. At the speed that car was going and how small she is—she would’ve died.”

“You could’ve died, too.”

And that stumps Izuku, because he truly doesn’t see why that matters. It was either him or the little girl, and to him, the answer was obvious. She’s younger, she has more potential, it wouldn’t have been fair to let her go so soon. He’s not as young, he’s already lived quite a life, so when it comes to worth, the little girl logically holds more value. So what is Eraserhead’s point?

“But I didn’t,” the boy argues, starting to get defensive. “Are you saying I shouldn’t have done it?”

“No. I’m saying that sometimes you have to think about different opportunities. There were other ways to save her without being so reckless.”

Great. Now he’s getting lectured.

Izuku *knows* that there were other ways. He *knows* how reckless his plan was. He *knows* that the chances of both of them surviving were remain low. But again, he doesn’t see why it matters. In the end, they both got out fine.

“I only had a couple seconds to think,” Izuku mumbles, not liking the uncomfortable feeling that’s spreading over his skin. “I still don’t see how else I could’ve saved her without shoving her out of the way. That would’ve caused her more harm, especially if I wasn’t fast enough and she got clipped anyway.”

Eraserhead nods. “Okay. So you—”

There’s a few knocks, and then the door is being pushed open, revealing a nice looking woman in nurse clothing. “Hi, Midoriya, how are you feeling?”

She gives a brief nod to Eraserhead, who straightens up a little. He looks a little hesitant, as if he’s not sure if he should stay.

Izuku clenches the blanket in his hands. “I’m fine.”

The nurse smiles. “Well I’m glad to hear that! Your arm is already healed and your shoulder relocated, so you should be free to go after I check the rest of your body, does that sound okay?”

Izuku is *uncomfortable,* but he says yeah nonetheless. This is just protocol, even if the whiteboard on the wall says that a doctor already checked over him when he was knocked out.

He doesn’t know if he’s relieved or not when Eraserhead steps outside, but he tries not to complain as he’s told to take off his undershirt.

The lady peers at his skin and frowns. “When did this happen?”

She’s pointing to the golfball-sized scar on his abdomen. The one from when he got shot. “Uh, a while ago. I got it treated, though.”

“Hm. The stitches were done a bit shabby—if it were done properly the scar wouldn’t be this jagged.”

Wow. Roasted.

“But I guess it’s healed, and there’s no other blemishes I can see, so you’re free to go. You’re body’s just a little sore.” She hands him a small bag of pills. “Take this medication once a day until there’s no more, alright? The pain should go away.”

When Izuku is given back his sweater and shoes, he’s quick to make it out of that too-clean room and head down the hallway. It definitely is the station, as he’s been back here more times than he can count.

He’s about to burst out the doors—holy shit, it’s dark outside! how long was he out?—when Eraserhead (no, *Aizawa)* suddenly appears from a side hallway. “This just came in a couple hours ago. The couple who brought it in said it belongs to you.”

He hands him a few large bags from off the counter, and Izuku recognizes them immediately. *Oh thank fuck.*

He forgot about his stuff in the midst of his panic. Hopefully everything is all there. He paid a lot of money for that shit.

“Thank you so much! Have a good night, Aizawa, sir!” He bows quickly at the man and heads for the double doors, wanting to get out of there before he can be studied even further. It’s always awkward

being around the man when he's not Rabbit.

"Hold it, kid." The man holds out a packet, and Izuku takes it with hesitant hands. Printed on the top of the first page is the—*the UA crest?*

UA, the heroics school that Eraserhead (and now All Might) teaches at? UA, the place he used to *dream* of going to when he was little? The place that he knows, deep down, would be his downfall if he ever tried attending it?

And Aizawa just gave him one of their packets. Why?

"Think about it." Aizawa says, eyes piercing as he searches his face for a reaction. "The exam is less than a month away. They'll still accept applications up until the night before if you email it to the principal."

Izuku is still too shocked to speak, or to do much of anything for that matter, as he's still stuck on his previous question: *why?*

Why did Eraserhead, someone that Izuku fanboys over just as much as he does All Might (though hopefully neither one of them are aware of it), give him an application to one of the most prestigious schools in Japan? One that's known for its amazing heroics course and teachers?

And to give it to him directly, as if he truly believes Izuku should apply for it—it doesn't make sense.

But the underground hero is already out the door, leaving Izuku standing alone in the deserted police station lobby, wondering what in the *hell* led him up to this point.

It doesn't matter, though. Izuku won't use it, he can't *afford* to. Things will become much worse for him if he goes. He's known that for a long time now.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

lots of eraserhead in this one.

a

no reason to go

Chapter Notes

(cw: child abuse)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the last week of training. Izuku almost doesn't believe it.

The beach is near spotless, with only a few piles of garbage and household items strewn about. Izuku knows he could probably clean it all up today if he wanted to, but that's not the point.

The point is that he *did it.* He made it, he's here, and so is All Might. It's been ten months of this grueling training, ten months since he met his favorite heroes, sometimes both in and out of his costume, and he's never been as happy as he is in this moment. He's incredibly stressed and anxious, sure, but still happy.

All Might jumps onto the steps leading down to the beach and crouches there, leaning forward to pick Izuku up by the scruff of his hoodie. He holds him at eye level, which does nothing but remind Izuku just how short he is.

Jesus, couldn't you have just bent down?

"It's almost all cleared, my boy! I'm very proud of you!" He jostles him around a little, and Izuku feels kind of like a limp rag doll in his grip. "I'm sure the locals will be overjoyed once they see what you've done here!"

That was the point, Izuku thinks. *I wanted to make them smile again.*

The beach used to be beautiful, he knows that much, so it's about time it was fixed back up to its natural state.

All Might straightens up, lifting Izuku even higher. "Now I wanted to ask you a question, Young Midoriya! Since my job is starting up in a few months, that means our training time will be cut short in the mornings. I would like to move our meetups to only weekends, if that's acceptable for you!"

Oh, fucking hell. Izuku doesn't drink—at least not legally—but if he did, he'd probably want some alcohol right about now.

“I know this is hard,” All Might continues, “and you don’t have to, but I feel like I should still ask.”

Izuku is stumped. He was under the impression that All Might would cut off all contact with him after school started back up again. He knows the man has to get to work early, so obviously mornings are a no-go, but to offer to keep training with him on the *weekends?*

He should say no. He really should. He should’ve said no a *long* time ago. Why would he keep doing this when he knows it’s just going to end up with him being hurt?

It shouldn’t even be an option for him, really, for reasons that are obvious. But when he really thinks about it, he doesn’t want to get rid of the strange feeling he gets in his chest when he’s near the man. He likes training with him. It makes him feel *good* about himself, because if All Might believes in him, then that’s all that matters, right? He can sit here and pretend that he deserves the praise and attention, all the while getting help on his skills and moves.

Is it selfish? Maybe. But it’s also cruel, so it all evens out. Izuku knows deep down that it’s all a lie, that he’s somehow fooling the hero into believing in him, so what’s the harm in hanging around just a little while longer before disappearing? Call it self-indulgence, or even self-destruction, it doesn’t really matter.

He just wants to know what All Might is getting out of this.

“If it’s not a bother to you,” Izuku says, offering a half-shrug, “I don’t see why not?”

It’s not like I have anything else to do.

All Might drops him onto the sand and strikes another pose. “Ah, I was hoping you’d say that!” He hops off the steps, a teasing glint in his eye. “Now, let’s fight each other with our quirks! No holding back now!”

Or maybe Izuku will die right here and there. That’s alright, too.

“It’s about time you brought this damn cat over, shitty nerd! Let me see it!”

Izuku glares at his friend as he tentatively holds Missy out to him. “It’s a *her,* Kacchan, not an *it!* And she’s got a name.”

The blond just snags the feline from his hands and stomps further into the house, leaving Izuku standing in the doorway.

“Have you no manners?” Izuku screeches, stepping in and shutting the door behind him. “You’re supposed to welcome me in!”

Kacchan snorts as Missy starts to climb all over him. “As if I’ve ever done that. And where’s her collar, shitface? Shouldn’t she have one if she’s yours?”

“I thought I told you to watch your fuckin’ language, brat,” Mistuki calls from the kitchen, walking over and instantly preening when she catches sight of her new guest. “Ah, honey, you brought Missy over this time!”

She goes to pet the feline after pulling Izuku into a bone-crushing hug, cooing at the animal in a very non-Mitsuki-like way.

Izuku shoots his friend a glare. “If Auntie remembered her name, you should've, too!”

“Tch, whatever.” Kacchan then starts to argue with his mother about *getting in the damn way,* and *I’m petting her, so screw off until I’m done.*

Izuku just watches the scene while shaking his head. It happens every single time, without fail. They always argue about some stupid thing the moment he gets in the door.

Eh. At least he’s used to it.

“Hey, Izuku,” Masaru says from the stairs, walking down with a briefcase in hand. “I gotta work for a bit because a buddy of mine called out, but I wanna show you something when I get back.”

Izuku perks up. “Oh, really? What is it!”

The man ruffles his hair as he walks past, saying goodbye to his wife and son. “Nothing much. I just got my hands on some older hero merch from the Bronze Age and thought you’d wanna take a look.”

The boy shrieks. “What? Where did you even—!”

“Work had some extra, and Katsuki doesn’t want them all, so I figured you’d take them. The shirts are too small for me, anyway.”

“Oh my god! Yes! Thank you!”

The man leaves before Izuku can make a fool of himself, and Izuku is stuck vibrating at a frequency that could break glass. Fuck, he *loves* the Bronze Age! All Might’s costume in that era is arguably his best.

Izuku may be biased because of the darker colors, but the fact still remains.

“What’s her name again?” Kacchan asks abruptly, and Izuku looks over to see Missy settling into his dandelion hair like a bird in a nest.

“Missy,” he says, glaring at him. “Which you would know if you read my texts.”

“Cry about it. And I do read them, I just don’t care.” His grin grows sharp. “And Missy, huh? Short for missile launcher. I like it.”

“Kacchan, no—”

“Yes.”

Izuku just sighs and goes to help Mitsuki with dinner. It looks like they’re having *nizakana* tonight, along with other things.

Mitsuki is busy getting the stove ready while Izuku quickly blanches the ingredients. Nizakana refers to any fish that is gently poached in a sweetened dashi stock which is typically flavored with either soy sauce or miso. It’s usually a part of every meal besides breakfast, and Izuku enjoys it greatly when he comes over to the Bakugou’s because he can never usually afford fish.

It’s a nice treat for him, especially since he loves to help make it. While he’s never been good at the art of actually preparing a meal, he’s good at the *presentation.* He can make any cheap meal look delicious in the end.

Blanching the ingredients is done to subdue the strong natural aromas and flavors of fattier fish, but it also removes the sliminess of it and prevents the broth from becoming cloudy.

While Mitsuki works with the actual fish, Izuku gets out some

vegetables. He likes mushrooms and sliced ginger with nizakana, as the zest goes well with the strong and savory flavors of the soy sauce and broth. If you add just a little bit of sugar at the end, the dish tastes *perfect.*

“How ya doing, kiddo?” Mitsuki asks, back turned to him as she prepares the food.

Izuku chops the ginger and sets it to the side. “‘M okay. I’m not as lonely anymore since I got Missy with me. She’s very playful.”

“Seems like a sweet cat. Where’d ya find her again?”

“On the streets. She had no collar on, and she kinda followed me around.“

A laugh. “I guess she chose you, huh?”

Oh, Izuku thinks, pausing briefly in his chopping. *Yeah, I guess she did.*

They switch places for a bit, Izuku poaching the fish and Mitsuki gathering the sauces.

“Oi, nerd! Come in here!”

Izuku narrows his eyes, incredibly suspicious at his friend’s jeering tone. “Why?”

“Just fucking come here!”

That doesn’t make him any less worried.

Mitsuki answers before he can. “He’s helping me cook, brat! Maybe you should get off your lazy ass and help me, too.”

“Hah? I cook all the time! The fuck are you implying!”

Izuku sighs and turns the stove down a bit. You don’t wanna boil the fish, just poach it with liquid. Keeping it at a simmer is the best way to do that. He figures it’ll only take five more minutes.

“Shut up, Kacchan. I’m coming.”

A rookie mistake, Izuku learns, as the moment he steps out of the kitchen he’s body-slammed by his friend. He twists just in time to avoid crushing Missy, who apparently followed the explosive teen off

the couch, and knees Kacchan in the gut.

He rolls to his feet and springs at him, taking care not to bump into the table against the wall. Breaking Masaru's very expensive vase is not on Izuku's bucket list, no siree.

Kacchan easily throws him over his hip, but Izuku just clings to his clothes and brings him down with him. Missy hisses as she avoids yet another flattening.

"If y'all are gonna roughhouse, do it outside! God knows what the hell ya both gonna break this time."

Izuku squeaks as he remembers breaking Mitsuki's coffee table that one day a few months back. It wasn't his fault, to be fair. Kacchan threw him into it, and since it was made of fucking *glass,* of course it shattered.

It's a good thing the Bakugou's aren't poor. He still felt bad about it, though, even after Masaru's reassurances that they were planning on getting a new one anyway.

A warm hand grasps his arm and drags him to the back of the house and through the doors. "Use your quirks," Kacchan demands.

"Fuck, not so loud," Izuku hisses. "Are you *trying* to get me killed? And I'm already worn out from All Might! He kicked my ass, Kacchan."

"Because you weren't using all your powers, nerd. Now come on!"

No. I wouldn't have won even if I used all my quirks, but I appreciate the vote of confidence.

Izuku ducks just in time, the heat from the blond's explosion sizzling his hair. "Hey, watch it!"

"You need a haircut anyway. You look like a fucking piece of broccoli."

"Wow. At least I don't look like a Pomeranian."

Izuku shouldn't have been surprised at the bigger explosion that followed.

“I hope you know you only won because I let you.”

“That’s the shittiest lie you’ve ever told, nerd.”

“I’m sorry, did I ask for your opinion? No.” Izuku points at the leftover fish on the teen’s plate. “Also, are you going to eat that?”

Kacchan practically snarls at him, and Masaru chuckles from his place at the table. He looks tired nowadays, but Izuku figures it must be from work. “There’s more in the kitchen if you want, Izuku. You never have to ask.”

“Here, I’ll get ya some. I was going back for more, too.” Mitsuki takes his plate despite his protests and comes back with the fish, along with a pie in hand.

It’s a wonder I’m not fat by now.

Kacchan suddenly kicks him under the table. “Your cat is being loud.”

Oh. She is. Taking a glance down, Izuku sees that she’s busy scratching at Kacchan’s legs. She must be hungry.

“I brought some of her cat food, so I’ll feed her after this.” He flashes the two adults a smile. “Thank you for letting me bring her over. I feel bad for leaving her all the time.”

The conversation picks up after that. Izuku chimes in here and there, but mostly resolves to cleaning off his plate and eating some pie. He’s gotten better about eating more, but instead of making the issue better, it seems to just make it worse.

Because now that he’s gotten used to eating more than usual, his stomach has stretched back to its normal size, which means that he’s *just as hungry*.

When Masaru gets up and collects all the plates, Izuku follows him instinctively. While he doesn’t have any jobs or expectations at the Bakugou household, Izuku still tries to clean up or help when he can. If he cleans, he’s technically earning his stay. So he helps Masaru do the dishes and clean up the kitchen, all the while listening to the

mother-and-son duo argue about something petty on TV.

When Masaru reminds him of the hero merch he has, Izuku immediately gets giddy. He follows the man up the stairs and soon enough he's staring into a box full of clothing and figurines.

"Holy shit," Izuku whispers, earning a chuckle in response. "This is so cool."

He picks up a nice pink sweater with an older hero on it, holding it up to himself to see if it'll fit him. Most of these clothes look a little big, but Izuku likes them better that way.

"I can have all of them?" he asks, still rummaging around.

"Yep. Katsuki already chose a few, so don't worry about leaving him some. You know how he is."

Izuku does know how his friend is, which is why he's a bit shocked when he comes across a large hoodie with All Might printed on the front. It's definitely from the Bronze Age like Masaru said before; Izuku recognizes the costume immediately.

The hero is giving a thumbs-up as he stands tall and mighty in front of a crowd. He looks younger in this one.

"I'm surprised Kacchan didn't take this," Izuku laughs, clutching it tighter to him as he picks up the remaining pieces of clothing.

Masaru chuckles. "I think he left that one for you, actually. He told me you'd like this one since it's your favorite look."

Oh. That's suspiciously nice.

When Masaru leaves, Izuku takes the two remaining hero figurines and clothes and sprints to Kacchan's room. The boy is already sprawled out on his bed, writing stuff down on a notepad. He grunts when Izuku enters but doesn't say a word until his friend snatches the paper away from him.

"Oi, the fuck are you—"

"Is this your hero costume?" Izuku asks, staring at the frankly horrible sketch and writing off to the side of it. "For UA?"

"What else would it be for?"

Izuku sends him a teasing look before sitting at the boy's desk. "I thought you had to pass the exam first before making this?"

"Eh?" Kacchan probably would've jumped him again had Missy not climbed into the explosive teen's lap. "You think I won't fucking make it?"

"Never said that," Izuku grins. "I'm just saying, aren't you're jumping the gun a little bit?"

The blond rolls his eyes. "You already know I turned in the application a month ago. Besides, we study a bunch of shit for the written part every time you come over. It's gonna be easy."

"Whatever you say."

It turns out that Kacchan actually has a few great ideas. His hero design is fairly simple—a low cut tank top with orange stripes to go with the aesthetic, black cargo pants and matching boots, and also sharp knee guards that strap on over his pants.

Izuku blinks, staring at the notes his friend has written off to the side. "You want to be able to kill someone with your knees?"

Kacchan scoffs from where he's playing with Missy. "I wanna break those extras in the least expected way possible."

"Alright. That's fucked up, but it works."

Izuku adds a few more details of his own, much to Kacchan's annoyance. He figures that while his friend has great ideas, they look a bit shitty on paper. No way is Izuku going to let his friend walk out into the world looking like he just rolled out of a dumpster. He's going to have *style*.

He puts a little color on the boots and sides, adding a tactical belt to the waist. If UA approves of it, Kacchan could have little grenades on him, kind of like Izuku does.

"I was thinking about putting in a form for some blasters on my arms," Kacchan says when Izuku gives him back the paper. "Something that'll store up my sweat."

"Ah, to make a bigger explosion? That'll be great."

He chuckles darkly. "More firepower to blow up those damn villains."

Yep. Izuku expected him to say that.

It's quiet for a while, and Izuku works on his own ideas in his notebook. His recent jobs have been making him anxious, as most of his supplies and weapons have been worn down. He's gotta make some more stuff to keep up with the increase in villains. Since school is out, tensions are running high. People are more high strung, leading to more crime.

It makes patrols with Eraserhead all the more fun, albeit a lot more tiring.

"The entrance exam is a week away," Kacchan grumbles. He sounds cautious, like he's waiting for something to happen.

Izuku just hums and crosses out a paragraph in his notes.

"You should be joining me."

The grip on the boy's pen tightens a little. Izuku forces a tight smile. "I wish."

"Whaddya mean you wish?" Kacchan's eyes are boring into his back. "You could if you wanted to. You'd make it, too, that's for damn sure."

Here we go again.

"I can't."

"Even without using all those damn quirks, you've still got a brain. It'd be a piece of cake for ya."

"We've been over this, Kacchan. I can't."

"Deku—"

"Stop it," Izuku snaps, the pen cracking between his fingers and leaking ink onto his sketch. "I'm here helping you, aren't I? That's what you wanted, so let me do this. Fucking *stop."*

Kacchan falls silent, which is usually a bad thing, all things considering.

The shame hits quicker than expected, and Izuku stares hard at the ruined paper before him. There's rustling, and then a pillow is thrown at his head. It falls to the ground and lays there, upside-down, and Missy takes claim to it at once. It didn't hurt nearly as much as it

could if Kacchan wanted it to.

Izuku swipes a hand across his face and breathes in deeply. “Sorry.”

“Whatever.” More rustling, and then the lamp on Kacchan’s nightstand flicks off, enveloping the room in darkness. “Hurry up, it’s already past nine.”

Missy purrs as Izuku rubs a foot on her belly, and the boy just pulls out his phone and turns on his flashlight, making sure it’s on the lowest setting. He needs to finish the idea in his head right now or he’s never going to.

What was he thinking about? New boots for his Rabbit costume? Maybe a magnetic knife that he can call back to him whenever he needs it?

Everything is fuzzy now. He can barely concentrate.

“Deku.”

His friend sounds annoyed, like always, but there’s an edge to it that Izuku cringes at. “I heard you, just—just give me a second, Kacchan. I’m almost finished.”

A grumble, but otherwise the teen stays silent.

Izuku doesn’t quite mean to, but he sketches through the night. He scribbles down whatever he’s thinking, and half the time it’s gibberish and half the time it’s nearly illegible, but he writes. He’s very good at that. He can always count on that being something he can do when he doesn’t know what else is there for him.

His Rabbit costume is still great. He doesn’t want to change its features, he just wants a few upgrades. The portable AI is on the way, so that’s off the list. He’s toying with the idea of new knives and homemade bombs. His flamethrower needs to be repaired, so he can check up on that later.

In fact, he hasn’t set anything on fire in a while, and that in itself is a crime. Is he really Rabbit if he hasn’t committed arson at least twice in as many weeks?

Eraserhead doesn’t approve of his fiery tendencies, but Izuku finds that he doesn’t quite care. In fact, he decided a while ago that he’ll continue to set fire to things just to spite the man. It’s not like he

burns down perfectly good establishments or police stations—no, he'd rather do that to villain lairs and hideouts.

It does a good job of flushing them out.

I wonder if I can create something for Eraserhead. Maybe give him one of the magnetic knives I'm going to make.

Maybe Present Mic wants something to add to his own costume. Maybe more leather? Weaponized boots?

A claw catches on his sweatpants, scratching the skin underneath the thin fabric, and Izuku glances down at the offender. Missy is sitting there and glaring at him, tail twitching in the faint light.

"No," he tells her quietly. "You gotta behave. He's sleeping."

A slight hiss, and then another whack with her paw. It's like she's trying to tell him something.

"I can't understand you. Go to sleep."

Missy hisses and fluffs up her fur. She doesn't seem to want to give it up.

"Why are you being so—*ow!"* Izuku abruptly stands up from the desk before Missy can whack him for the fourth time. "Okay, okay!"

He turns off his phone's flashlight and plugs it into the extra charger in the wall. It's after midnight now, and Izuku briefly wonders how he didn't notice how fast the time was going by. He picks the feline up and tosses her onto the bed, earning another hiss in response.

Izuku tidies up the desk as best he can before making his way over to his side of the mattress. Kacchan looks to be asleep, his back turned towards him with his chest rising and falling very slowly.

He looks peaceful, and for a moment Izuku hesitates. This isn't his bed, after all. Most of the time he sleeps on the floor, mostly by choice, but sometimes he does like to be next to his friend. It gives him a form of comfort. But does he even deserve to be near Kacchan after being so rude to him?

Izuku sighs and carefully climbs onto the bed, not wanting to wake him up. He doesn't bother getting under the covers, as he gets hot easily. Besides, he kinda likes the cold.

Missy prances over and curls up on his neck like he's nothing but a fluffy blanket, though Izuku doesn't really mind. He can still breathe, so he turns slowly to face the fan on the nightstand.

If he'd been more aware and hadn't been nodding off to sleep, Izuku probably would have seen the way Kacchan rolled over to look at him.

He probably would have seen the mix of frustration and sadness in his friend's eyes.

"Get up."

A whimper. "No, please. I can't."

"I thought you wanted these quirks. Why are you whining? Do you want to disappoint me?"

"No! I never wanted them! Please—" There's a resounding slap, and the voice cuts off with a cry.

"Pleading will get you nowhere. Need I remind you what happens when you disobey me?"

The short silence is almost deafening. "No, sensei."

"Good. Now get up."

And then there's electricity shooting through his veins, pain dancing across his skin as monsters lurk from the shadows, a hand on his face—

Izuku jolts awake, heart thumping out of his chest. He doesn't know where he is, everything is so dark, so quiet, *fuck, why is he here?*

Someone grabs his arm and he flinches, hands coming up to protect himself, breaths coming out in pants.

“Hey, kiddo, you alright?” Present Mic stares down at him, brows furrowed in concern.

Izuku blinks once, then twice. “What?”

The voice hero laughs softly, hand leaving Izuku’s arm. “You’re still in the laundromat. You fell asleep about an hour ago.”

An hour ago? The wash doesn’t take that long? What is he—*oh.*

Yamada gets up to put his clothes in the dryer, which is weird, since Izuku hasn't heard it beep yet. That means it must’ve been done before now. Which can only mean...

Izuku’s eyes widen. “Oh my god! I’m so sorry!” He shoots to his feet and bends down low, his face on fire. “I didn’t mean to disturb you!”

He just slept on Present Mic’s arm. He laid his fucking *head* on the man’s shoulder, probably making him very uncomfortable and also wasting his time for, what, an hour? How did he even do that? He doesn’t even remember falling asleep!

The hero waves him off. “‘S not a problem at all, kiddo. I don’t mind. You look like you need the extra sleep anyway, yeah?”

Izuku just continues to apologize profusely, not stopping until Yamada comes back and hands him a Slim Jim.

When the air gets less awkward and Izuku isn’t as embarrassed, the boy starts to think about what just happened. He was asleep on the man, and Yamada didn't move him once, even when his clothes were done.

And fuck. It must be almost eleven at night now. He wasted a lot of the hero’s time. That seems to be something he’s good at, huh?

Izuku chews on his Slim Jim and tries to shake off the coil of dread in his stomach.

The nightmare stays with him all the way back to his building. Missy is standing by the door and meowing when he arrives, obviously hungry.

Izuku feels a little bad about being late. He's been trying to make a set schedule for her so she knows what to expect. He usually feeds her dinner around nine, and it's a few hours after that.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry!" He scratches behind her ears and sets his folded clothes on the counter. "Here."

Mixing some wet food and dry food together, he sets her bowl on the floor next to her water dish. Her new collar shines brightly when Izuku flicks on the lights, and he admires the hot pink coloring just for a moment before turning on the hot burner. He's craving some coffee.

If he's not going to eat, he can at least have some caffeine to keep him going.

He still can't get the nightmare out of his mind. He can barely remember it, and yet it stays there, weighing him down with every movement and thought.

Izuku can't quite tell if the nightmare was just that, a nightmare, or if it was a memory. Perhaps a mixture of both.

"Don't you feel this power? I could give it to you. All you have to do is ask nicely."

The boy shudders, hands gripping the edge of the countertop. God, he needs to sleep. But he knows he can't after what just occurred.

Kacchan still hasn't texted him back. Izuku wanted to go paintballing sometime next week, as he's been saving up for it for quite a while. It's pretty cheap this time of year. But his friend hasn't replied back, and it's been a week. Izuku knows the exam is first thing in the morning, so there's no chance he'll respond now, not when he's most likely resting.

His friend does like his schedules.

Izuku's head hurts. His vision starts to spin if he keeps his eyes open for too long, and it feels like they're burning. He glances at his phone and sees that it's an hour or so until midnight.

He—he's disappointed. He doesn't know why. He doesn't know why

he's feeling *anything* right now. Fuck. He needs to buy some sleeping aid.

How much does he need to drink for his enhanced metabolism to process it correctly? A whole bottle? Or is that considered an overdose?

Whatever. That's a stupid idea, one that he'll probably try the next time he gets his hands on it. Maybe he'll negotiate for some of the good stuff from his dealer at the Club. He's usually pretty cheap and reliable when Izuku asks for pain pills.

But there's nothing to do about it now. He doesn't feel like going out, he doesn't think he should even bother trying to sleep, so what is he supposed to do? And great, now he's not disappointed anymore, he's just *frustrated.* Frustrated at himself, frustrated at the goddamn *world.*

He's still mortified over the fact that he slept on Present Mic's arm. Does Izuku snore? He doesn't think so. At least, Kacchan has never complained about anything like that before. Did Izuku annoy him as much as he thinks he did?

And on top of all those feelings, Izuku doesn't feel like he belongs *anywhere.*

The Bakugou's are like his second family, and so is Ms. Hanako and her small family. But it's not really his. It's stolen.

Izuku doesn't deserve it. He's leeching off of them, isn't he? Taking advantage of their ignorance and kindness. He wants so badly to push that feeling away, but each time it just comes back at him and eats at his insides.

The apartment is much hotter all of a sudden, despite it being the top floor of the building and also one of the coldest nights of the year. Izuku pulls off his new All Might sweatshirt and shakes his head against the dizziness it causes.

"Sometimes I just feel so homesick for a place that doesn't even *fucking* exist." The words come out rough and jagged around the edges, and Izuku digs his palms into his cheeks to try and stop the scream from leaving his lips. He is so angry.

He's frustrated and sad and guilty and everything in between, and the worst part is he doesn't even know why.

There's an inkling there, a nasty voice at the back of his mind that tells him *you know exactly fucking why,* and *you just don't want to admit it to yourself.*

"Pathetic. Useless. Traitor."

He's starting to shake now, and Izuku's hands slide off his face and hit the counter with a thud. *Get over yourself.*

There's a short hiss to his left, and he looks over and sees that Missy is on the arm of the couch, sitting with her paws tucked neatly under her tail, ears flat against her head. She must have already finished eating.

Izuku shakes his head. "Does that make me a bad person? Does it?"

To want more than I have? To want more than I deserve?

The cat just cocks her head and mewls, ears coming back up to its normal position.

She's probably judging me, Izuku thinks sourly, but then she lets out another noise and the boy realizes with a start that she must be begging for more food.

He forces out a smile and goes to get some of her treats, snorting as she immediately jumps off the couch and comes up to him with her tail held high.

She's always polite and gentle when he gives her treats. She'll take them right from his hand, which was kind of surprising at first. He expected a cat like her to not trust him at all until at least a couple months in, and yet here they are.

He watches her chew the small treats and sighs.

"I'm sorry. You'd probably be better off without someone like me taking care of you." He bends down to pet her a little. "Guess we're both stuck with each other now, huh?"

She purrs and slinks off down the hallway, as elegant as always. She goes to sleep right after eating, and Izuku usually does the same.

But now he can't, can't even stomach the mere *thought* of it, so the only thing to do is straighten up the house and finish some of his projects. His AI is already completed, he just has to take it for a test

run during tomorrow's patrol, maybe see how well it holds up. He's worried about the durability.

Oh shit. He doesn't have training tomorrow morning because of the entrance exam. All Might is apparently proctoring it. Possibly to root out potential successors, Izuku guesses. Or maybe because he *has* to be there since he's just starting out.

Ugh. He doesn't even want to think about UA or heroes right now. His fight with Kacchan is still fresh.

Izuku winces when he remembers how All Might looked at him after telling him about the proctoring. He almost looked... resigned. Because Izuku hasn't changed his mind about going? Or because of something else?

And now that he's thinking about it, maybe Izuku's disappointment in himself is because of this. He just wants to make the man happy, even if he knows it's futile.

Well. Unless.

He thinks of All Might's blinding smile as he tells him the words Izuku has always wanted to hear but never dared to believe in: *"Even someone with a villain's quirk can be a hero, my boy."*

He thinks of Present Mic patting his shoulder while laughing at one of his own jokes, just barely keeping a hold on his quirk.

He thinks of Eraserhead's burning gaze as he hands him that packet, of the no-nonsense way he speaks to people. The man wouldn't have bothered with Izuku if he didn't think he was worth it.

And lastly, he thinks of Kacchan. How many times has his friend tried to convince him to try harder? To chase after this age-old dream?

He remembers being just shy of six years old and gripping Kacchan's slightly sweaty hand, both of them outside in their All Might onesies with not a care for the world.

"We're gonna be heroes together, right Kacchan?"

"'Course, ya dumb nerd! We'll be the best!"

And he believed him then, too, because why wouldn't he have?

All Might, Present Mic, Eraserhead, Kacchan—they all believe in him,

don’t they? Even if it’s fake, wouldn’t it be more of a waste to disappoint them? To have wasted all of their efforts, big and small?

Izuku’s eyes slide over to the discarded papers on his desk, buried under a mountain of notebooks and his Rabbit costume.

He’s going to regret this. He’s not thinking correctly. He really is going to hate himself in the morning.

“They’ll still take them up until the night before.”

He has thirty minutes to spare. He can bullshit his way through this like he’s done with everything else in his life.

Izuku lets out a shaky breath and grabs the UA application.

Chapter End Notes

e

testing

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

UA is enormous.

Izuku finds this out the second he steps onto the school's street. Sitting atop of a forested hill that looks out over Musutafu, UA is *huge*.

Which is unsurprising given the fact that it's the number one ranked high school for heroics in Japan and, in Izuku's opinion, the world. It has an alumni of famous and successful pro heroes, including that of All Might himself, Endeavor, and even Best Jeanist.

Most of the top heroes all graduated from the same place; that in itself speaks volumes on the credibility of UA's teaching. That's why it's near impossible to even get in.

So, to put it simply, Izuku is *nervous*.

The campus itself is usually gated and protected from criminals and reporters, but now it stands open for the hundreds of examinees going in. Guests would normally have to have a special ID card to be allowed in—at least, that's what All Might told him, but now isn't the case.

He really shouldn't be here. Nope. The open gate in front of him isn't welcoming at all; it's like the *UA Barrier* is jeering at him from where it arcs high above him. Like it's just *daring* him to go through with this.

To be honest, Izuku is surprised his application was even accepted. He does have a criminal record, after all, even if it's not that bad. It's not like he could lie about those specific records either; they most likely would've done a security check and disqualified him immediately for falsifying documents.

UA is very serious about legalities, as the principal and staff can get into a lot of trouble if something were to go wrong regarding students or training.

Izuku had taken pictures of the *many* pages of the application and emailed them to the principal a few minutes before twelve last night.

There must've been a filtering system attached, as he received the verification email less than a minute afterwards. He'd spent a good twenty minutes before that trying to figure out what he *could* lie about, however. UA asked for a lot of things: his parent's name and occupation, phone number and address, medical records, a birth certificate, and so on.

It's not like he could put down *abandoned building a couple miles away from the bank* as his address, so he did end up lying about that, among other things. He just had to make sure that his lies were believable, and also foolproof. Again, he couldn't lie about his criminal record, as that's easy to look up. He just hopes that everything he put down won't be looked into *too* much.

But anyways. UA is much larger than he expected.

It has to be, he guesses, seeing as the school offers a wide variety of courses to take besides heroics. They have a range of classes, too, like most other schools: A—K. For every letter there's two more of the same class, which means there's thirty three classes always active there. To accommodate all of their students, UA has to be large.

Izuku takes a deep breath and forces himself to move forward. He's only a few minutes early; if he wants to be on time for the written exam he has to get going.

I can do this. They all believe in me. Eraserhead gave me that application directly, I can't disappoint him or—

He trips on air, having been too focused on not chickening out to remember how to walk correctly.

Or I'll just embarrass myself here and become one with the sidewalk. I wonder if UA will let me become their doormat. That's honorable.

His face is hovering over the ground a couple feet, and when he looks down he notices that so are his legs. Huh.

Is this death? He's just floating there, what the *fuck.*

There's a giggle to his left, and his head snaps up to see a pretty girl with shoulder length brown hair standing right next to him.

"Uh, hi?" He squeaks, because he's *still in the air; does that mean she's an angel?* He wouldn't be surprised either way.

She laughs again and takes his shoulder to set him down, and Izuku is overcome with dizziness as gravity seems to work again.

“I stopped you with my quirk!” The brunette smiles, fingertips meeting together to form some sort of praying gesture. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask first, but I figured you wouldn’t mind me catching you!”

Izuku just stands there, mouth slightly agape and cheeks reddening. She’s really cute, he thinks. She’s also a *girl.* He hasn’t talked to many girls before, at least not as Midoriya Izuku. Rabbit gets all kinds of fans, though. But this is different.

He didn’t even hear her come up to him. He’d been so preoccupied with his nervous thinking and doubts that he hadn’t paid any attention to his senses. Now that he can see her, though, he can feel the presence of her quirk burning at his skin. Hm. Another strong power.

It must have something to do with weight and gravity, as she just stopped him from falling. Can she make things float up, or just leave them hanging? And it looks like it’s touch activated, given by the weird praying-gesture she’s doing. Maybe that’s what releases it, or maybe what keeps it active?

“Well, guess I’ll see you inside!” She says, waving goodbye.

And now Izuku feels like an asshole. She must’ve said something before that and he hadn’t answered her. What was it? Something about this all being nerve-wracking? He has to apologize, and also thank her for saving his dignity. She seems really nice, so it’s only polite to—

“Deku?”

Oh fuck. Izuku stiffens, all previous thoughts abandoning him. He hadn’t been planning on seeing Kacchan this early on in the exam. Actually, he’d been hoping that he could avoid his friend the entire day.

“Nope,” he says, not bothering to turn around as he tries to speedily make his way towards the steps, hoping to get a chance to see the girl again. “Wrong number.”

“Deku!” A hand grabs his shoulder and spins him around. Kacchan is glaring at him now, a scarf wrapped around his neck. “The fuck are you doing here! You said you wouldn’t take the exam.”

“Honestly? I don’t know what I’m doing here either.”

“You changed your mind? Why?”

Izuku shrugs off the hand, aware of the stares and whispers coming from the passing examinees. “Wow, it’s almost like you don’t want me here, Kacchan.”

“Don’t be stupid.” The blond starts to drag him towards the entrance. “I’ll let it go for now, shitty nerd, but don’t think you’re getting out of telling me just what the fuck happened. We’re gonna be late for the written portion.”

Izuku is resigned, and as the duo walk into the large building and follow the signs to their testing room, he wishes it wasn't illegal to punch people for seemingly no reason. He doesn’t want to punch Kacchan—well, not now, at least—he wants to punch the bitches who are whispering around the pair as they walk past.

“Isn’t that the boy who held up against the sludge villain?”

“What’s his name again? Bakugou or something?”

“Yeah, he’s the real deal.”

Izuku takes his water bottle out of his jacket pocket and chugs some of it, willing himself not to snap at them. Don’t they realize it’s not nice to bring up somebody’s trauma?

“Are you drinking?” Kacchan asks suddenly, staring at the bottle in his hand. He obviously doesn’t think it’s water.

“Uh, no?” Izuku frowns. “I wouldn’t drink on school campus, Kacchan; I’m not that dumb.”

Izuku doesn’t miss the disbelieving look that passes over his friend’s face.

It turns out that the written exam was easier than Izuku worried it to be. In fact, it seems that he and Kacchan *overstudied* for it.

Most of it was multiple choice; simple questions about the main four subjects: math, science, Japanese, and history. But then they also had a few open-ended questions about quirk laws and management. Izuku's *favorite* part, however, was the mini essay on the very back. You only needed to write one page, but Izuku ended up doing five, and that's only because he almost ran out of time.

The essay contained an analytical question that needed to be answered in the form of neat and well-thought out paragraphs. It was a situation about what to do first in the case of a fiery villain attack in the middle of a crowded city. Most of it was easy and simple, at least to Izuku. He answered it to the best of his ability, pencil scratching against the multiple pages at a furious pace.

He must've looked crazy to the others around him. Oh well.

And so here they are, in the UA auditorium, waiting for the short presentation given before the last exam.

The lights suddenly flick on, and Izuku feels the color drain from his face as he sees who's standing on the stage, clad in his full hero costume. *Oh, come on.*

"What's up UA candidates!" Present Mic screams, making vague gestures with his hands and body. "Thanks for tunin' in to me, your school DJ! Come on and *let me hear ya!"*

The silence that follows makes Izuku cringe. He would've screamed back had he not been worried about Present Mic recognizing him and calling him out. Izuku shivers just thinking about it.

"Tough crowd, huh? That's alright, I'll skip to the main show! Let's talk about how the practical exam is gonna go down, okay? Are ya ready!" The projector hums to life and displays a huge diagram of UA and its side buildings. "Like the application said, you boys and girls are gonna be out there conducting ten minute mock battles in super-hip urban settings!"

This is weird. I've spent so much time around him when he's off-duty that I forgot how he usually acts around other people.

"Gird your loins, my friends. After I drop the mic here you'll head to your specified battle center, sound good?"

Oh, that's right. Izuku looks down at his card and examinee number. His is one number after Kacchan's, which is why they're sitting together, so that must mean they made the seating chart based on your education.

We went to the same elementary school. They probably didn't know where to put me since I took middle school online, so they just put me next to one of my old classmates.

In UA's defense, Izuku did turn in his application literally last night. It's not like the school had much time to figure out his placement.

Izuku has battle center B while Kacchan has A. The boy doesn't know if he's relieved or disappointed. It'd certainly be harder to get points with his friend in the same center, seeing as Kacchan will most definitely try and take all the robots for himself, but he also kind of wanted the extra motivation.

The blond huffs. "They're splitting us up so we can't work together."

"As if you'd ever work together with me," Izuku taunts. "And my examinee number is one higher than yours, which means I'm automatically better."

Kacchan glares at him. "Stop looking at my card, shitty nerd."

"Okay, okay! Let's check out your targets. There are three types of faux villains in every battle center. You'll earn points based off their level of difficulty. Your goal in this battle is to use your quirk to raise your score by *shredding* these faux villains like a mid-song guitar solo!" Present Mic does another weird entertainer's pose. "But check it! Make sure you're keeping things heroic. Attacking other examinees is a UA no-no, ya dig?"

Izuku sticks an elbow in his friend's side. "Damn. There goes your plans, Kacchan."

He just barely ducks the swing to his head.

Izuku looks at the projector again, this time realizing that there's only three robot silhouettes. The sheet he'd picked up before entering the auditorium states there's four, however, so something's not right. Hm. It must be a surprise factor. They're obviously keeping it quiet for a reason, Izuku figures.

It seems he's not the only one to notice this.

“Excuse me, sir, but I have a question!”

A spotlight suddenly shines on the new speaker, and Izuku stares at the tall, blue-haired boy as he stands up with his hand straight in the air. *He’s kinda handsome.*

“Hit me!” Present Mic says, shooting finger guns at him.

“On the printout there’s four villains listed, not three. With all due respect, if this is an error on official UA materials, it is shameful! We are exemplary students.” Izuku calls bullshit on that. “And we expect the best from Japan’s most notable school. A mistake such as this won’t do!”

Kacchan mutters something that sounds suspiciously like *fucking goody-two-shoes,* and Izuku hides a snort behind his palm.

“And additionally, you with the unkept hair!” The boy spins around and points right at Izuku, glasses shining in the projector’s light. “You’ve been muttering with your friend this entire time! Stop that. If you can’t bother to take this seriously, leave! You’re distracting the rest of us.”

Alright, damn. Just call him out like that. He doesn’t seem as handsome anymore.

“Hah?” Kacchan says loudly, eyes promising death. “Only I get to make fun of the damn nerd! Get that stick outta your ass, you fucking extra, and then we’ll talk.”

“That language of yours is hardly appropriate, I must ask that you—”

“Ya wanna know what I think about my language?” Kacchan raises a palm menacingly, and Izuku has to slap his arm down and pull his friend back into the seat when he starts to get up.

The blue-haired boy is a couple rows down, but Izuku knows that wouldn’t stop Kacchan from going after him. “Quit it! You’re embarrassing me!” Turning to look at the taller teen, Izuku dips his head quickly. “Sorry.”

The boy’s eyes just narrow, but thankfully Present Mic saves the day. “All right, all right, examinee number seven-one-one-one! Thanks for calling in with your request.” A new silhouette suddenly appears on the board. “The fourth villain type is worth zero points. That guy is just an obstacle we’ll be throwing in your way. There’s one in every

battle center, but try and avoid it, yeah? It's not that it can't be beaten, there's just kinda no point! I recommend you listeners try and ignore it to focus on toppin' the charts."

Blue Boy sits down after bowing stiffly. "Thank you very much! Please continue."

He seems nice, Izuku thinks, still holding onto his seething friend's arm. But still blunt and a bit impolite.

"That's all I got. I'll sign off with a little present: a sample of our school motto! Just as General Napoleon Bonaparte once said..."

Izuku stops listening to the voice hero the moment he hears the name Napoleon, and he groans quietly to himself. Boring. They must be forcing the voice hero to say this spiel, as Izuku knows Present Mic would never stray this far into the rabbit hole. He knows how to entertain, but now he's just spewing school bullcrap.

"...Are you ready to go beyond? Plus ultra!" The man pumps a fist in the air, getting no reply back—no surprise there. "Good luck, and I hope you practiced hitting more than just books."

The bus ride to his battle center isn't long at all, barely three minutes. Again, the fact that they have to take a bus to get to the other side of UA's property is jaw-dropping in itself. UA is *rich* rich.

Izuku and Kacchan separated at the station, leaving the boy all alone. Which isn't a big deal, really. As long as no one talks to him he should be fine. It's not like he's going to go out of his way to talk to any of the others, anyway. That would be dumb and—

It's the girl from earlier! The one who stopped me from falling!

The brunette is standing in the middle of the crowd of other examinees, looking incredibly nervous. She must be stressing out about this, and Izuku can relate, albeit for an entirely different reason.

He should go talk to her and thank her. He might be able to get her mood up if he cracks a joke.

Izuku forces his legs to move forward, only for an arm to block his way.

Fuck. Blue Boy is back, and it looks like he's already judging him. His

gaze flits from Izuku to the girl in question, and then back to him.

“She looks like she’s trying to focus on the trials ahead,” he says. “What are you gonna do? Distract her and ruin her chances to succeed?”

Izuku bristles. “No, no, of course not! I was just gonna thank her for helping me earlier!”

“Sure,” Blue Boy says disbelieving, voice hard.

And great, now everyone else is looking. They’re talking about him now, he can feel it. The attention makes him feel small, and Izuku clenches his fists to stop himself from snapping at the boy. He seems nice, if a little pretentious, so it’s not right for Izuku to get upset.

He’s more upset over the fact that everyone else seems to have already written him off, like they think he won’t be able to bring forth anything to this battle. It sucks.

A loud voice comes from above, and Izuku looks up to see Present Mic on a tall tower. “Right, let’s start! Get moving!”

Now that is a command that Izuku knows how to follow. Hell, he’d do just about anything to get away from Blue Boy at the moment. All he has to do is move, and so he does. His limbs burn with the sudden use of power, and he darts through the unsuspecting crowd and rushes inside the battle center.

He’s the first one in, and hopefully he can keep that place on the leaderboard.

“He’s got the right idea!” Present Mic shouts from behind him. “There are no countdowns in real battle, listeners, you’re wasting airtime!”

Izuku can hear the thundering of footsteps behind him and giggles to himself. This is more like it. He practically thrives in battle; he loves the thrill of it. It’s familiar, it’s easy, and he lives for it.

This challenge is the most fun he’s had since he spray painted that dick on one of Endeavor’s billboards.

Don’t judge him. It’s not a crime to deface trash.

Right. So there’s three robots, each worth their own respective amount of points. The higher the number, the more difficult it is to take them

down. Sounds easy enough. The only thing to do is actually find them now.

Izuku finds that that's not going to be a problem about two seconds after thinking that, because as soon as Izuku rounds the corner of a street, a huge metallic claw comes crashing down, just barely missing him.

He jumps up and twists his body, leg coming up to kick off the head of the robot, revealing a set of wires and switches underneath. It's still standing, though, and that's when he sees the painted two on it. This one's worth two points, then.

He grabs one of its large fingers and yanks, driving a punch through the middle of its torso. It falls into a heap on the ground, and Izuku wastes no time before sprinting off again.

Oh, this is exciting. *Extract* is going crazy right now. There are a lot of other examinees in the battle center with him, and he can feel their power all around him. He kind of wishes he could use his quirks to help him out with everything, but he knows there's cameras watching his every move. He can hear the thrum of the drones flying above.

The robots seem to cluster together the closer Izuku gets to the middle of the faux city. Sometimes in pairs, sometimes more.

He is in the middle of the main road, fighting off three robots, one of them a two-pointer and the other two three-pointers, when he realizes that they can be turned off manually.

He dodges a heavy blow from the robot behind him and picks up a piece of shrapnel leftover from one of his other kills, swinging it like a bat at the nearest robot's face. It pops off like something from a cartoon, and Izuku watches as the head hits the third robot in the face and sends it stumbling back. Izuku braces himself and throws the long piece of metal like a spear. The robot shuts down immediately when it gets stuck to the concrete wall, Izuku's makeshift katana sticking out of its abdomen.

Oh, what Izuku would give to have his bōstaff right now.

He goes to fight off his other robot, only to find that the laser beam dude has already taken care of it. The back panel of the machine is open, revealing the same set of wires and switches that he'd seen on the other one. There's one switch, and Izuku can recognize the pattern of the wires and placement of them to realize that this must go to a

signal.

It's must be controlled by a program being broadcasted, not by someone watching through its eyes. If Izuku had a little time to spare, he could probably search for the head robot that carries the signal and tear it up, effectively shutting all the remaining robots down at one. But he won't. That's cruel. The other contestants wouldn't have a chance, and who knows how far the range is and if it'll affect the other battle centers or not.

What he will do, however, is take parts of the panel that already fell off of the robot and pocket them. That's expensive metal! Izuku can get a lot of money for it if he sells it to a local scrapper. Or he can use it for himself.

He takes a few pieces and helps a boy up from the rubble of another three-pointer, only nodding in acknowledgement to the thanks he gets in return.

How many points does he have now? He's lost count. And what about the time? They have to at least be five minutes in already.

He wonders how Kacchan is fairing at his battle center.

Izuku spots another robot sneaking up on a girl with vines for hair. She's preoccupied with fighting two, so she doesn't see the one coming up behind he. The boy immediately jumps it, smashing it against the wall with a powerful kick. It was only a one-pointer, so it's down instantly.

The girl gives him a grateful look before returning to the fray, and Izuku does the same.

"Two minutes left, listeners! Get in your last points!"

He's getting a little tired now. He's gotta slow down before he uses too much of his energy. He should have enough points. There's nothing wrong with him taking it slow for a bit, right?

But then there's rumbling. The entire earth shakes and windows rattle as something opens up in the ground around ten buildings away from Izuku.

And *holy fucking shit, that's a big bitch.*

Standing at what has to be at least a hundred and fifty feet tall, the

robot's multiple eyes gleam red as it starts to saunter its way forward, destroying the obstacles in its path with ease. That must be the zero-pointer. The one that Present Mic told them to run from.

The one that the examinees *are* running from. A lot of them are screaming as they sprint past him, actually. Izuku realizes that he's the only one standing in place, staring in awe at the flawless machinery and design, and he's just about to turn around and head for the exit when a cry rings in his ears.

His head snaps forward, his eyes zeroing in on the figure that's right below the robot, trapped under a large slab of concrete.

Izuku recognizes the light brown hair and is moving before he can think differently. Great. This is just like the speeding car and little girl situation, except this one probably won't end in death or severe injury. At least he hopes so.

She might get stepped on. Aren't there any pros monitoring this right now? There are cameras all around here, there's no way they don't see her right there. Guess he's gotta do it himself.

Izuku forces more of his energy into his legs and knees and jumps onto the edge of a building, hands scrabbling for a hold on the windowsills. He climbs up further and leaps off the wall and onto a nearby roof. He's gotta get to the robot before it gets to her. Maybe he can distract it by fighting it.

He flies across the rooftops of the buildings and squints his eyes against the glare of the sun. He's still not high enough to reach its head, and he needs to if he wants any chance of defeating it. The head is the weakest part.

There's a camera flying by, Izuku can see it hovering right in front of the looming machinery. The girl is still struggling down below, and that knowledge alone is enough to put the idea into Izuku's head.

He veers to the side and springs off the edge of the roof. The camera is large, so it should be able to carry his weight and then some. He lands on it and uses it as a springboard to soar across the remaining distance. The robot's face is right in front of him now, and his fist pulls back, his breath catching in his throat.

And later, when he looks back on this moment, he'll say that that's probably the dumbest idea he'd had in about four minutes time.

His hand goes through the metal of its face, shattering a hole right next to its eye. It does nothing but poke a decent sized hole, however, and his wrist and knuckles explode in white-hot pain. Fuck. He must've just broken his hand. Of course he did. That's straight metal. *Reinforced* metal. Much stronger than the other, smaller robots.

Wow, he's just the sharpest tool in the shed, huh?

The robot is still moving, even with him holding onto it with one broken hand. He swings his lower body up and uses his legs to smash into the hole yet again. It widens up, and Izuku is relieved to see that the inside is hollow.

He crawls inside the opening, fighting to stay balanced as the robot shifts and tries to get him out. And hah, there it is, the power source!

He was right. This is the one that's sending out the signals to the other ones. It's been active this entire time. Izuku grabs the control panel with his good hand and fucking *tears* it out.

Electricity sparks from the outlets, liquid pouring from the side of one of the holes. Izuku feels the blood drain from his face. Oh fuck. Bad idea. *Bad* idea.

Everything starts to crumple in on itself with him still inside, which is very bad because that means it's going to—

Izuku uses one last burst of power from his his legs to spring forward and out of the hole he made, twisting like a corkscrew just as the robot implodes. The parts go flying. Shrapnel flies past his ears and heat licks at his back. He screeches like a dying bird as he plummets through the air, because oh, he's *so* much higher than he thought he was when he jumped on the camera.

And shit. He's going to hit the ground hard unless he uses *Pull,* or maybe even *Deflect* to help with the impact, but honestly he'd rather die than have that can of beans opened. He tries to right himself to land on his legs, knees slightly bent, as he knows that that's the most promising way to land without a parachute.

This kind of reminds me of the whole helicopter bomb thing. Kinda ironic.

The ground rises up to meet him and Izuku braces for the pain, only for a hand to slap him right in the face before he can touch down, making him float again.

Either that or he's actually dead.

He flops onto the concrete when the anti-gravity quirk releases him from its hold. He can barely think with the adrenaline still pumping through his veins and ears. His hand hurts like fuck, but he's had worse.

Izuku lifts his tired head to stare at the brunette, who has, for the second time, saved him from falling. "Hey, thanks for that. I—"

The girl promptly throws up a sea of rainbow and sparkles, and Izuku blinks a few times before turning away to give her privacy. Must be an effect of her quirk. Maybe quirk overuse, which explains why she couldn't get the slab of concrete off of her quick enough in the first place.

Fucking UA and their dangerous and slightly unfair entrance exams.

Izuku finds that the concrete here tastes amazing, almost like it's artificial. This is 10/10 the best concrete he's ever had the pleasure of nearly dying on.

The timer runs out, and Izuku faintly hears Present Mic yell about the exam being officially over. Eh. He doesn't really care in this moment.

He doesn't know how much time passes before a cane pokes him in his side. He was busy trying to take a nap, so he grumbles when he's nudged onto his back, only for his eyes to blow wide open. He knows who the person above him is. He's studied her in his medicinal textbooks!

"Hey there, sonny," Recovery Girl says, voice just slightly raspy with age. "Lemme see that hand of yours."

Oh my god, it's actually her! She's so much smaller in person.

Izuku is aware of the lingering examinees standing off to the side. They must've come back once the zero pointer was defeated. He sees Blue Boy staring very intensely at the ground, seemingly lost in thought. Izuku wonders what he's thinking about now.

"Come here, sugar, and eat these gummies while you're sitting there." She takes his hand gingerly and kisses it after handing him a few vitamins, making Izuku's face practically catch on fire. His embarrassment is short lived, though, as he watches with awe as his hand is enveloped in green light before returning back to its original

color.

It doesn't hurt at all anymore. It's—it's completely fixed. *That's a lot cooler when I'm not reading it in a textbook.*

Izuku doesn't pay attention to the laser beam guy explaining Recovery Girl's job and quirk, as he already knows about all of it and then some. What he does want to know is why the other boy knows about her, too. Oh, maybe they share the same interests!

Recovery Girl hands out more gummies, praising them all and their abilities, but before Izuku can work up the courage to talk to either her or the laser guy, everyone is being ushered out of the arena, being promised with results in only a week's time.

He leaves without a word, trying to escape any possible conversations with the others now that his social battery has run out. He succeeds, for the most part.

And wasn't that some godly adrenaline there? He hasn't felt that high in forever, and it only lasted ten minutes! It felt like an hour to him, though.

That could've gone a little better, he thinks, but there's nothing to do about it now.

"Deku!" A familiar voice rings out, just as Izuku is about to step out onto the street leading down the hill. "Don't think I've forgotten about the fucking explanation you owe me!"

Izuku tenses, meeting Kacchan's primal gaze for only a moment before turning tail and running like his life depends on it, because it kind of does.

Chapter End Notes

v

finally

Chapter Notes

> we just recently hit 30k hits. thank you guys so much :) I can't express how much I love you guys!! I love reading your comments!! thank you < 3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Toshinori sees that familiar mess of green curls pop up on one of the large screens in front of him, he doesn't choke, but it's a close thing.

He swallows back the blood in his throat and jerks forward in his chair, aware of the sudden questioning looks he receives from the other teachers around him. He ignores them, though, as he's too focused on trying to make sure that his mind isn't playing tricks on him right now. Because this has to be fake. Midoriya isn't actually here, tackling two robots at once at an entrance exam he told Toshinori he wasn't even going to *think* about taking. There's also no way he's doing this *good.*

That's not to say Toshinori thinks Midoriya is incapable, of course not, it's just that he's never seen his trainee quite like this. He's never seen him in an actual battle setting, fighting off pieces of complex machinery left and right without so much as a breath in between. The change is refreshing, but it's also frightening because *why didn't I know he could fight like this? We've sparred together plenty of times.*

The camera on the screen changes to a bird's eye view of the center of the mock city, and Midoriya is lost against an ocean of other examinees and robots.

Toshinori is still reeling. He can't really process this. That is *definitely* Midoriya. His instincts are telling him so, and besides, there's not many other short boys with green eyes and hair in Musutafu these days. At least, not ones that he's seen.

But the fact that the kid is here, taking the exam, means that he had lied to Toshinori—well, not lied. He never promised anything to the hero. The only things he'd said to him were *I don't know what I want to do yet,* and *I'm not going to UA.* Toshinori is still uncertain about why he'd specifically said UA and not any hero school in general, but oh

well.

The point still stands, though, that Midoriya never promised anything, so it hadn't been a lie. So why does Toshinori feel a little... sad?

He'd been willing to wait. Just a couple more years and Midoriya would've been eligible for the Commission's hero program. Not all pro heroes get their license by going to UA or other available schools. Some can't go to school, or never made it in to their ones of choice. Those aspiring heroes apply for the program the Commission offers once they turn seventeen and are then trained directly by other pros.

It's hard to get in, sure, but with the number one hero's recommendation, Toshinori is sure Midoriya would've done just fine. He would've done fine without a recommendation, he knows, but still.

That's how Hawks had done it, Toshinori is sure, and the young hero is already number three in approval ratings at the age of twenty-two. There's no reason why Midoriya wouldn't be able to do the same. But that plan would have only worked if the boy even agreed to it.

But again, Toshinori had been willing to wait. Hell, he'd even been working up the courage to tell *Gran Torino* about his trainee if only to get the old man's help in training him. He had been willing to get into contact with his *scary as all hell* teacher to get Midoriya the best resources he could for training. Yeah, that's how serious he is about this.

Now those plans are going down the drain, though Toshinori can't say he's upset about that. He's more upset about Midoriya not telling him. He had just seen him the day before, so why hadn't he mentioned this? Had he just now changed his mind, or had he kept it a secret as a surprise?

He doesn't know, but he's certainly not complaining. The boy is *destroying* those robots, after all. There's no way he won't get in.

This is great for Toshinori. Finally, the world seems to be spinning his way. He won't feel so guilty about making Midoriya his successor if the boy actually goes to hero school. He can be trained a lot easier that way. That's how Toshinori's master did it with him, after all.

But all of this excitement doesn't stop Toshinori from physically cringing when the camera changes again a few minutes later and he sees the boy use the camera like a trampoline. He jumps at the robot,

fist reared back and brows furrowed in concentration, a certain gleam to his eye. It's when he sees his trainee nearly get blown up when he escapes from the inside of the head just before it implodes that Toshinori really does choke on his own blood.

Everyone in the room tenses as the boy plummets to the ground, and Toshinori can barely breathe until he sees the brunette Midoriya had saved slap him in the face and halt his fall.

He could've *died,* and yet the boy is smiling as Recovery Girl heals him a few minutes later, face split into a wide grin as he most likely fanboys over the healer and her quirk. He doesn't look too beat up, Toshinori notes, but it's still a reminder that things could've been so much worse.

The number one hero doesn't remember his own entrance exam being so... deadly. Or maybe that's just because he hadn't done something nearly as reckless as his trainee has.

"Who is that?" Kan asks, and Toshinori suddenly remembers that the blood hero is here because his next set of students will be in this mess of an exam. He has to know what he's working with, seeing as he'll be their teacher. Aizawa is there for the same reason, he's pretty sure. The man hasn't said a word to him this entire time, though.

"That would be one Midoriya Izuku," Nezu says, sounding way too pleased with himself as he types on his computer. "Aged fifteen with an emitter type quirk he calls *Boost."*

"Enhancements?" Kayama guesses. The R-rated hero is lounging off to the side, eyes twinkling as she watches the replays of the battles. She'd told Toshinori that she's only here because of Aizawa.

"Correct!" Nezu chirps. "Not very powerful at first glance, but it seems Midoriya has honed it to be quite the substantial ability."

"He got first place?" Toshinori asks, hoping he sounds nonchalant as he leans back in his chair and clears his throat. He wants to know how many points his successor—*ahem,* his trainee got, as it had certainly felt like a lot while watching.

The principal moves away from his computer to look at another monitor of his. "His points are still being calculated after the last robot, but as it stands right now, Midoriya is indeed first."

The sudden pride that runs through Toshinori is nothing short of

euphoric.

Kan points to the monitor hanging on the wall. “Number two is that exploding kid from Battle Center A with seventy-seven points. None of them are from rescuing, which isn’t something we see very often.”

“Interesting.” Nezu balances a pen on a claw. “It also seems that both Midoriya and Bakugou went to the same elementary school, which would explain why my filters separated them into different centers.”

So *that’s* his friend, Toshinori concedes. He’s never met him, but he recognizes the name. Midoriya talks about him sometimes when they take the occasional break and eat some sandwiches. He hadn’t expected said friend to be such a riot, especially since Midoriya is like a walking ray of sunshine around the hero and couldn’t *possibly* be acquainted with a kid like that, but it’s nice to finally have a face to go with the name, Toshinori supposes.

Nezu tilts his head, something akin to a frown settling onto his face as he clicks to another tab on his computer. “It seems, however, that Midoriya has a criminal record. His name is attached to quite a few cases of public quirk usage, assault, and interference with police work.”

Toshinori shrinks in on himself at that, and he swears he can see Aizawa, who’s been hiding in the corner of the commentator’s box, shift on his feet out of the corner of his eye.

“To be quite honest,” the mammal continues, “I don’t know how he made it past my filters. His application should’ve been denied immediately.”

Denied. The word feels heavy in the air. Toshinori knows UA doesn’t joke around about that sort of stuff, so he feels his chest tighten a little bit. UA has a no-record policy, no matter what the charges are for.

“I’ll vouch for him.” The words escape him in a rush, but it’s not just his own.

Toshinori stiffens as he makes eye contact with Aizawa, who’s currently staring at him with such intensity that he has to fight a shiver. It sets the hairs at the back of Toshinori’s neck on end.

“What?” Aizawa asks, voice as monotone as always even while asking a question. Toshinori’s previous encounters with the man have given him the inkling that the underground hero doesn’t like him very

much. “You know the kid?”

And isn’t *that* a loaded question? Aizawa is *smart,* Toshinori knows. The man has taken one comment and put the words under a microscope, nitpicking at the underlying details.

Toshinori smiles sheepishly. There’s no point in lying, is there? “Only a little bit, Aizawa. I’ve seen him around. Given him tips on training and whatnot!”

That's not suspicious at all.

Aizawa quirks a brow but still somehow manages to look uninterested. "You’re willing to vouch for a kid you’ve only met in passing?”

Okay, that’s a bit unfair. “Well, he just seems like a bright kid, Aizawa! And besides, aren’t you willing to as well? It hardly seems fair to put me in the spotlight here!”

The hero doesn’t skip a beat. “I’m vouching for him only because he doesn't have zero potential. He also happens to have gotten first in the exam. It would be a waste not to look into him.” Aizawa dips his head, face shadowed. “And as the number one hero, you’d think you’d be used to the spotlight by now.”

Haha, *fuck.* Why is Toshinori getting so flustered? It’s just a conversation; he doesn’t even have to reply. But now everyone is looking at him and alright, now that he’s thinking about it, maybe it *is* a little weird to just go out and stick up for a kid he probably has no business knowing, but still.

Before Toshinori can stutter out an answer, the door suddenly bangs open, revealing a disheveled Present Mic.

And that’s when Toshinori decides that he *loves* his blond coworker. He won’t be able to thank him enough for saving him from Eraserhead.

“Holy shit!” Yamada screams, voice cutting out midway thanks to Aizawa’s erasure. “Did y’all see the end there at Center B? Christ on a *stick,* Sho! Tell me you saw that!”

He gets a long-suffering sigh in response. “Unfortunately.”

The voice hero just laughs loudly and throws his arms around his friend. “Sho! Sho! You know that kid I was telling you about a while

ago?" He shakes him like a child would a present on Christmas. "The one from the laundromat?"

"The one you refuse to stop seeing even though our washer was fixed months ago?" Aizawa asks quietly, still unimpressed. He looks irritated at having this conversation where everyone can hear, and Toshinori doesn't blame him.

He's not really a fan of social interactions either, which is surprising given he's literally the number one hero. He'd rather not get into all that, though, and more than once he's gotten in trouble with his publicist for *accidentally* missing a few requested interviews.

"That's the one!" Yamada is unfazed by the other hero's indifference. "Well guess what? Guess what, Sho!"

Aizawa seems to have disconnected from his body, however, so Kayama promptly answers for him, eyebrows wagging in delight. "Ooh, what is it, darling?"

That last part makes Toshinori only slightly less confident in his theory that the R-rated hero *isn't* currently dating anyone. It's hard to tell when she's being serious considering she's a dominatrix. She could probably be dating everyone in this room and Toshinori wouldn't realize it.

"It's the same kid! The one who blew up the zero-pointer!"

And now Toshinori is *very* confused, as well as a little concerned. What are they even talking about? Midoriya has mentioned meeting Present Mic in the past, but he's never mentioned anything about laundromat meetings.

Aizawa seems to be even more bewildered. "Midoriya?"

Yamada snaps his fingers. "Yep, that's him! I'd recognize the little listener anywhere!"

"Oh my god," Aizawa mutters, holding his face with a palm. "Hizashi, you idiot, why didn't you ever tell me his name?"

I'm definitely missing something here.

"Wait, what's the big deal?" The question just makes the black-haired man shake his head and stare blankly at the other for a few seconds, as if having a silent conversation, and it's not long after when Yamada

gasps. “Oh, don’t tell me!”

Aizawa sounds incredibly tired when he speaks. “He’s the delinquent that’s been terrorizing Tsukauchi and I, Hizashi.”

As bewildered as he is, Toshinori can’t help but chuckle at that. It seems his trainee is more famous than he thought, though that might not be the best thing.

Yamada screams again, throwing his head back. *“No way!* You’ve gotta be fucking with me! We’ve both known him this entire time? No!” He cuts off in a wheeze, doubling over. "Sho that's fucking *hilarious. How did you not—?”*

He breaks off into another bout of laughter, making Toshinori smile. The voice hero is always good at brightening up a room.

“Well, that solves a few things,” Aizawa says. “Delinquents number two and three are the same kid, and apparently the fourth one I didn’t even know about is also one and the same.”

Four delinquents? Jesus.

Yamada sobers up quick. “The fourth?”

“All Might ran into him before, too, though I’m sure it runs deeper than that.”

Toshinori ignores the obvious jab and instead frowns. “Who’s the first?”

“Not important,” Aizawa says flatly, turning back to argue with Yamada about *not telling me his name, damnit.*

Ouch.

Kayama rolls her eyes playfully. “I’m sure you’ve heard of Rabbit, All Might. He’s been giving Shouta gray hairs for the past few months, though it’s obvious the kid’s grown on him.”

“The vigilante?” Toshinori asks, just to confirm it. “I didn’t know Aizawa was the one on the case.”

She smirks. “I have a few photos of a certain mural Rabbit painted of Sho, if you’d just give me a minute to find it. I’m sure you’d love to see it, hm?”

Toshinori perks up despite himself, only for Aizawa to whip around and glare at the pair.

“Not another word, Nemuri.”

Kayama just snickers and sends the underground hero a teasing look. “Don’t lie, Shouta, you told me you were flattered.”

“I thought it was beautiful,” Yamada agrees, wiping away a fake tear. “Truly a renaissance painting in its own right.”

The two heroes start to cackle, not at all worried about the growing irritation from Aizawa. The dynamic these three have is incredible, Toshinori thinks.

Kan must feel the same way, as the man curls his lips in mild disgust from where he’s sitting quietly near the other set of monitors, watching the conversation going on with mild interest. “You guys are weird,” he states plainly. “It’s a wonder you two made it to adulthood.”

“I was always in adulthood,” Kayama corrects, causing Yamada to burst into yet *another* fit of laughter.

Toshinori hides a snort at their antics. They’re way too funny when they’re together.

“If you all are quite done,” Aizawa interrupts pointedly. “I think Nezu has something to say.”

Everyone settles down immediately at that and looks at Nezu, who’s waiting patiently in his seat. “Thank you, Aizawa. I just wanted to say that the points have been calculated and are now displayed on the large screen.”

The projector on the wall flashes to life, and the teachers watch as the highest ranking students are counted down from ten. Everything seems normal, as most of it all comes out as expected anyway, until Midoriya comes up on the number one spot.

Toshinori can only gape at the two boxes next to the boy’s name labeled *villain points* and *rescue points,* because there’s just *no way*.

Yamada is the first to react. “What the *fuck?”* He screeches. “Is that even possible?”

“I second that,” Kan says seriously.

“One hundred and ninety-eight,” Kayama observes. “That has to be a new record, right?”

It is. Toshinori would know that because *he* was the previous holder of said record, standing at a whopping one hundred and eight points. The only person who’d ever come close to that is Endeavor himself. For Midoriya to get *ninety* more points than him?

Toshinori is in equal parts flabbergasted and proud at the same time.

“I agree that such a high number is normally unachievable given the short time frame allowed,” Nezu starts, “so I must admit that I hold a little bit of fault for this unusual occurrence. You see, I made a small mistake in my previous calculations. Can either of you guess what that was?”

The number one hero internally winces. There always seems to be time for a pop quiz with the mammal.

Aizawa is the only one who answers, still sounding bored despite the events going on. “The zero-pointer was the primary transmitter for the other robots. Midoriya destroyed it less than a minute before the exam ended, so the signals were still going out. Destroying it disabled all of the active ones, which effectively immobilized them.”

“Very good,” Nezu nods. “If you look at the footage again, you can get a glimpse of the inside of the zero-pointer’s head. The transmitter seems to have been ripped out.” He lets a self-satisfied smile slip through. “Had Midoriya taken down the zero-pointer any other way, the panel probably would have stayed intact and thus continued to send out signals, as it was designed to do.”

The room is quiet for a few moments after that, and Toshinori can understand why. He’s having trouble wrapping his mind around this. “Do you think he knew?” He asks the principal.

“Perhaps. But whether or not he had won’t change the outcome, being that is he’s now currently the holder of UA’s highest record in history.”

Yep. Toshinori is so taking the boy out for lunch sometime. He deserves it after this. This is just—this is *incredible!* And the boy did it all on his own!

Kayama rests a chin on her palm, eyes squinting as she glances at Nezu's computer. "It says here that he's already completed all of his high school education, and he's currently working on a college site right now for a standard diploma. That's a lot of studying for a youngster."

Now, that's not really a surprise. Toshinori already knows that Midoriya is finished with high school, but he *didn't* know about the college thing. He wonders why the boy never mentioned that to him, as that's certainly a big deal given the fact that he's not even sixteen yet. That's a huge feat.

"Really?" Yamada whistles, brows rising to his hairline. "I knew the listener was smart, but damn!"

"If he's already finished with his required education, why are we even considering him? You can't go to high school twice."

That's Kan who's speaking again, voice a deep rumble.

I almost forgot he was there.

"Are you kidding?" Toshinori can't help but ask, pointing to a replay of Midoriya's takedown of the zero-pointer. "Did you see him in action? He earned the highest points out of all the examinees."

Nezu hums in agreement. "As Aizawa said, it would be a shame to let such a promising opportunity pass us by, would it not? His skills are remarkable, as is his strategic planning. It's also worth noting that here it says he left a small comment on the bottom of his application. He claimed that he's only here to try for the hero course, and that he's not interested in any of the others. I'm sure we're all aware that such courses are not offered in basic high school education, which I'm assuming is what he got."

The mammal is staring at the footage with something dark in his beady eyes, and all the teachers in the room let out a full-body shiver.

Damnit. I know you see his potential, too, Nezu. But lay off.

"Legally speaking, it's entirely possible for him to still attend UA and receive his hero credits despite having already done general high school education. It will, however, be up to his homeroom teacher to decide whether or not to require him to do non-heroics related classwork."

He's speaking as if the boy is already enrolled.

"Homeroom teacher, eh?" Yamada says, looking smug all of a sudden.

Toshinori understands why when he sees the look of dread flit across Aizawa's face.

"No," the underground hero says firmly. "Kan can have him."

But it seems that Nezu has already decided, if the manic laugh that escapes the principal is anything to go by. It's a lost cause at this point.

Everyone knows you can't stop the mammal when he's set on something.

Shouta honestly doesn't know what to think anymore.

He hadn't been expecting anything when he walked into the commentator's box and sat down with a few other teachers, screens laid out in front of them like every other time they've done this. He was supposed to be there to get a feel for his potential first years, as this year marks the time of a fresh new batch of students. His third years had graduated two years ago, and his last batch of first years were all expelled. He's trying for a new batch again this year. Hopefully they'll have more potential.

Shouta admits that he's relieved to not have to deal with any of his past students anymore.

Don't get him wrong, he loves his students—well, most of them, anyway—but they're a handful to deal with. He has a feeling this year's group is going to be even worse. Especially since he's been assigned *Midoriya*.

The kid who's acted way more suspicious in Shouta's eyes than most of the villains he's encountered, though that might be a little unfair to say since he doesn't even know *why* Midoriya seems suspicious to him, or even what Shouta thinks he'll do if his paranoia turns out right.

He was surprised to hear that the kid he'd been forced to chase after that first time they met is actually the same kid that Hizashi talks about all the time. The one who apparently goes to the laundromat around the same time every couple of weeks. *That* kid is bright, bubbly, and enthusiastic. His humor and love for heroes is off the charts, along with his laugh—which Hizashi has told Shouta about multiple times, each with growing fondness.

While the Midoriya that Shouta knows is definitely enthusiastic, the hero wouldn't go so far as to call him bright and bubbly. More like nervous and jumpy with a little bit of a troublemaker's mindset mixed in.

But what can you do? The revelation is certainly a big surprise, which is why Shouta is still thinking about it when he and Hizashi are driving home. They can at least enjoy the rest of the break in peace now that all of that is taken care of.

Shouta is leaning back in the leather seats, face turned just a little bit to look out the window when he asks the question. "Didn't you say you found him getting picked on?"

"Who, Midoriya?" Yamada continues at his husband's sharp nod. "Yep. The little monsters cornered him in an alley and took his notebook. They were hitting him, too."

Shouta frowns thoughtfully. "Why didn't he fight back?"

"Beats me, babe. They claimed they were just playing a game, though the kiddo obviously wasn't enjoying it. Had a cut on his eye and everything."

Hm. The entire situation has become even more interesting, if that's even possible.

Shouta doesn't like to butt into places where it doesn't concern him, mostly because he doesn't care enough, but also because he *does* actually believe in privacy. What's weird, however, is that he finds himself wanting to know more about Midoriya. About his situation. His home line.

From the moment he met him that night up until now, with him watching the kid break his goddamn hand to take down a robot for a high school exam, everything has just been one giant question mark surrounding his name.

And Shouta didn't really mind much at first. He had no reason to care. Midoriya is just some teenage delinquent with a probably subpar father and living situation. Nothing too crazy or out of the ordinary. Now, that *would've* been okay with Shouta. That would've been enough for him to just leave it at that.

But now that he's getting to know a little bit more about Midoriya, the more he's beginning to realize just how *little* he really does know.

Shouta knows Midoriya could've fought back in the situation Hizashi described if he wanted to. Very well, in fact. The kid has no qualms with picking fights with actual criminals and potential murderers or thieves, so why wouldn't he in that particular circumstance? Sure, it's different with other children. The law is strict about using your quirk on underage kids, but Midoriya is underage, too. He could've claimed self-defense.

It would've been so easy for him.

Shouta wasn't there, obviously, so he can't really judge, but from what Hizashi has told him, the fight wasn't *too* brutal. It's still unacceptable, of course, and Shouta wouldn't have stood for it at all, but it wasn't too bad. Midoriya displayed incredible skills at the exam, which confirms to Shouta that the boy could have *easily* laid those 'friends' out if he so wished.

Was he scared? Is that why he didn't fight back?

Shouta shakes his head. There are too many thoughts running through his mind now, too many unanswered questions.

He couldn't have been more happy to sink onto the couch in their shared apartment after the short drive back. The day seems to slip by, but it happens ever so slowly. Shouta doesn't really mind that, however, not when he has his wonderful husband and three cats to share his life with.

His comfort never lasts long. The events of today are still fresh, and even when they're both supposed to be falling asleep, full from a very nice dinner that Hizashi cooked, Shouta keeps thinking.

Everyone did pretty well during the entrance exam. Shouta spotted several kids with good potential, which almost *never* happens right off the bat, by the way, and Shouta can already tell he's gonna have a harsh three years in store for him from this new group of students.

And Midoriya.

There's something off about him. Something *familiar* that he just can't put his finger on. He closes his eyes and keeps seeing the way the green-haired boy fought off three robots at once, ducking and weaving between blows and using fairly complex moves to finish them off. He noted the precision in which Midoriya used shrapnel from a fallen robot to pierce the body of another and pin it to a wall, allowing him time to get a powerful kick in.

He did all of this in the span of a few minutes, gaining the most points since All Might and Endeavor themselves even *before* defeating the zero-pointer, and he *still* managed to make time to help other examinees.

Midoriya is skilled. Shouta already knew that; he'd heard it from Tsukauchi, which means quite a lot saying that the detective doesn't praise just anyone. But to see it himself? To witness him fighting firsthand?

Shouta has seen Midoriya fight one time, and even then that was the first time he met him. He'd only gotten a glimpse of him knocking the criminal out, which then led to him having to chase the kid down a few streets to help out Sansa. What was the most confusing part of the night, however, was when he'd caught Midoriya slipping a flash drive from his sleeve into his pocket while Shouta was walking him home.

And if he's being honest, he doesn't know why he let the boy have it. The information on it wasn't anything earth-shattering, as he'd obviously gotten Tsukauchi's files from his office computer, but it did hold a few private records and contacts.

Shouta's contact, for one. That should've been enough for the hero to keep the flash drive and drag the kid back to the station to charge him with government theft, but he didn't. Which is confusing.

He never does that. He very rarely has a lot of patience or sympathy on the best of days, but he'd had just about none that night. And yet he *still* let him have it.

Again, there's something off about Midoriya. Something unsettling, but not quite in the *he poses a threat to everyone around him* sort of way, more of in a *danger follows him around like some sort of bodyguard* way.

And Shouta hates it because it's painful, it's familiar, and it might kill

him.

It might kill him soon.

Izuku gets the text the next day.

It's only five words, but when he sees who it's from he gets excited, because All Might is *texting* him. Him—Midoriya Izuku. Sure, he's done it before multiple times, but it doesn't stop Izuku from feeling a little giddy.

His excitement is replaced with nervousness when he actually reads the text, however.

Meet me at Dagobah tomorrow!!!

Three exclamation points. Izuku is concerned. This can either mean All Might is really happy about something or really *upset* about something.

Izuku has a feeling it has to do with the entrance exam, because of *course* it does. The hero was there, after all. There's a high chance he saw Izuku at his battle center.

Is he angry at him? Disappointed? Izuku probably should have told him, right? Even though it was last minute. He owed him that much, at least.

When he shows Kacchan the text to get his opinion on it, the blond slaps him in the back of the head and tells him not to worry so much, which makes Izuku punch his friend in the arm in retaliation. They're walking back to the Bakugou household now. They just went paint-balling, and Izuku is ashamed to admit that it ended with Kacchan winning. Izuku may be a better shot when it comes to guns, but Kacchan definitely knows his friend's movements well.

They can predict each other almost perfectly.

But the next day, when Izuku is at the beach alone, with no Kacchan to make him feel better, he's tense. He's worried. He doesn't know what to expect from All Might when he sees the hero jogging down towards him from the top of the stairs leading to the parking lot.

For some reason, Izuku expects a hit, a lecture, maybe some disappointment, but what he doesn't expect is for the man to pick him up clean off the ground *in his small form* while spewing out praises and shouts of glee, spinning him around in a circle.

What. The. *Fuck.*

Izuku is pleasantly shocked, but also a bit sick because *why are we going so fucking fast, holy shit, is this a rollercoaster?*

The boy can barely even understand half of what the hero is saying, so he's grateful when he's eventually put back down on the sand, even though he immediately misses the close contact.

"Young Midoriya, why didn't you tell me you were applying!" The number one hero asks. "I would've put you in as a recommendation student if I had known!"

Well shit. Then I'm glad I only decided last night.

Izuku offers a slight quirk of his lips, rubbing at his arm. "I, uh, I guess I wanted to earn it?"

A small laugh, and then the hero is gripping his shoulders, soft blue eyes burning with intensity as he stares at him. "Well, that doesn't matter now. My boy, you did amazing! You blew us all away—quite literally with that last robot!"

I... did amazing?

Izuku turns red with embarrassment. "Yeah, that part was, uh, not really planned."

"I can tell, but even for such a rushed plan, you did remarkably well! And with such little injuries!"

Izuku wants to remind him that he did break his hand, but then thinks better of it. It's not like that's a major injury, after all. He's had worse.

And so Izuku settles on another shy question. "Did I pass?"

It's All Might's turn to look sheepish. "Well, I cannot tell you that, but I will say that you did just fine! There's no need to worry, trust me!"

And Izuku kind of does, because *I wasn't worried about not getting in. I was worried about disappointing you.*

They talk for an hour more after that, mostly about Eraserhead and Present Mic, and also about how Izuku never mentioned just how much he knows the heroes. Kacchan also comes up, along with why Izuku changed his mind about applying, so he repeats the same bullshit he told Kacchan about *wanting to take risks,* and he hopes the man takes the answer.

It's an enjoyable, if not slightly awkward conversation, as Izuku can tell something's wrong.

There's something off with the way All Might is carrying himself. There's a tenseness in his shoulders and a tightness near his eyes. He's hiding something.

For a while there, Izuku is convinced that he has upset the man. He doesn't know why or how, but he has, and it makes him feel terrible.

He's already come to terms with it by the time they run out of things to talk about, or at least until one of them brings up another hero or past life experience. Izuku is prepared for a lecture, for an apology before the words *I'm stopping the training* comes out. Because that's how it always happens, right? It begins with a false promise and fake hope, and it all ends with the truth of the matter being revealed.

But what's the truth in this case? Is it that All Might actually hates him and is disgusted by him now—because Izuku is *sure* that that's it. He's heard it from so many people on so many different occasions that it can't be anything but the truth now.

He's ready for it when All Might finally turns to him, face a bit grim now, hand on Izuku's shoulder. He *thought* he was ready for it, at least, but nothing could have prepared him for what his idol said next.

"My boy, I think it's time I tell you about One for All."

Chapter End Notes

a

dangerous combination

Chapter Notes

> this chap was a bitch to get out, but hey, at least we hit over 100k words :))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All Might ends up giving Izuku a week to decide, which is honestly a lot more time than the boy deserves. It's not enough, though. Could any amount of time ever be enough? Not for this, Izuku thinks. Never for this.

He's running through the city, bōstaff clutched tightly in one hand as he glides over rooftops and street wires. It's getting a little warmer out, and he's incredibly thankful for that fact. His costume doesn't do much against the cold.

He has to distract himself, at least for a little while. Patrolling usually does the trick; it helps calm his nerves. Getting into little skirmishes with criminals helps ground him, in a way.

Because here's the thing: Izuku loves the fight. He loves it more than he loves living, because it feels good, because it's familiar, because it's the one thing he can control. Because as insane or sick as it sounds, the split second before his fist connects with bone and flesh is the only second where he can *breathe*.

And by *god* does he need to breathe at this very second.

He's very close to breaking down. He can feel it. He can feel the itch under his skin, the tightness near his eyes and mouth; everything feels so acutely *wrong* and he doesn't know why. Actually, scratch that, he does know. Just doesn't want to admit it.

Izuku already knows the story about One for All. Has known since the very beginning, even before All Might came into his life. How could he not with who his father is?

And that's another issue entirely. Izuku fights because it's all he knows. He *wants* to fight, because it's easy for him. He needs it, which is why he's out here today. This situation of his is peculiar, and it's making Izuku feel worse than ever.

He's leading All Might on. Deep down, there has always been that small inkling at the back of Izuku's mind that says *he's only training me because he's getting old and needs a successor,* but he's never let himself believe that for more than a moment. He's not a good choice to be anyone's successor, much less All Might's.

Izuku briefly wonders if All for One is included on that list, but then pushes that thought away. He doesn't need another reason to spiral into that pit of despair.

Maybe his thinking isn't entirely incorrect. Maybe he *is* nothing but a pawn in All Might's game, just the next step in the course to defeating the evil in this world, as that's what One for All's purpose is, right? To defeat All for One?

Would he have offered it to me if he knew who I was—no, who I am?

Izuku doubts it. He'd probably be in a dark prison cell if the number one hero knew. Tartarus doesn't sound too improbable, if he's being honest, but that would be the best case scenario. More than likely Izuku would be experimented on like some lab rat since having multiple quirks is practically unheard of.

The Commission has done it before. Izuku knows they won't hesitate to do it again, even with a child.

The other thing that's been nagging at Izuku is that he hasn't told Kacchan about All Might's offer. His friend will obviously be on board with it if it means Izuku will tell someone about his powers, which will never happen. Not if he has any say in it, at least.

And Izuku hates it. He hates the situation. Hates the lying and the confusion and the feeling in his gut that's telling him to *just give in.* He hates himself for even thinking about accepting the quirk. He already knew about it, of course, but it doesn't make it any better. He shouldn't even be near All Might, much less talking to him and training with him and eating fucking *sandwiches* with him.

He should've said no, right then and there. Right when the words *One for All* left the hero's mouth. It should've been simple, and yet here he is, *thinking* about it.

The explanation took a good ten minutes, and that was just All Might explaining the basics of what his quirk does and how the transfer works, of what Izuku, in all senses, shouldn't already know. And the boy stayed quiet the entire time, frozen in thought, because again, he

had a feeling this would happen, but it didn't quite set in until that very moment.

"You don't have to say anything right now, Young Midoriya, I am merely informing you of what you might expect should you say yes."

Izuku doesn't speak. Can't speak. Because if he does, he might just blurt out that godforsaken word after all, and then everyone will end up dead one way or another.

"How does a week sound? I don't mean to pressure you."

The boy nods his head. He understands. Deadlines are deadlines. The number one hero has to move on to someone else if Izuku doesn't accept.

That's just the way the world works.

Izuku finds himself pacing on top of a bank near his building a few hours into his impromptu patrol. He never usually strays this close to his house, but it's whatever. It's not like there's specific territory he's not allowed to go in. Most areas are free range for him, being a vigilante and all. Minor rules such as no trespassing don't apply to him.

A gang runs this part of the town, he knows, but he's on good terms with them. They don't harm anyone innocent and never cause much property damage. If anything, the gang kind of protects the residents of this neighborhood from other, more violent organized crime units. So Izuku doesn't snitch on them or take them down, and in return they won't come after him. It's a win-win.

The bank he's on is still open, even at this time of night—well, morning, he should say, as it's currently one o'clock. The lights are still on despite practically no one coming in. That's always how it is in these parts.

The only people who go to a bank at this hour are robbers and vigilantes. And apparently, Izuku finds, underground heroes.

"A figure is approaching to your left."

It seems his AI works after all.

Izuku turns his head just in time to see Eraserhead drop down from a neighboring building and walk toward him, hands in his pockets.

“Rabbit.”

Izuku nods at the greeting and resumes his pacing, not offering any verbal reply.

They still meet at their spot every Friday, but nowadays they seem to see each other more often, even when they’re both patrolling on opposite sides of the city. Izuku is starting to think it’s not as accidental as Eraserhead says.

The hero doesn’t seem put off by his silence, though, and he stops a couple feet away to watch Izuku’s stressed walking. “You know, I was hoping to see you at the entrance exam.”

It’s more of a question. A baited one, at that. Izuku can identify it because he asks those kinds of questions all the time; that’s how you get information out of people. He doesn’t really mind the underground hero doing it to him, so he just plays along, still only half paying attention. “Who’s to say I wasn’t there?”

Eraserhead huffs, sounding amused. “Thought you’d say that. But to be frank, I don’t think you’d have jeopardized your position like that.”

Damn. That’s what Izuku thought, too.

The boy stops his pacing to glare at the other. “I don’t know if I should feel offended or not.”

“Depends on if you actually went and took it.” Eraserhead sits on the ledge, wordlessly beckoning him over. He’s obviously just teasing now; he doesn’t know *what* Izuku has done. “Here, I brought you something.”

“Please tell me it’s not your mixtape.”

The man shoots him an unimpressed look and throws something at him. “An egg and cheese sandwich, actually.”

“Oh.” Izuku frowns a bit. “Thank you.”

“No problem, kid. Now are you going to stand there all day or come sit down?”

Izuku’s legs move on their own accord. He’s eaten an early breakfast with the hero before, but never like this. And never this close to

Izuku's house. If he looks, the boy can just see the top of his building less than half a mile away. It's kind of unsettling, knowing Eraserhead is this close to it.

That feeling is like the cherry on top to everything that's weighing him down right now. Those fears and doubts wash over him again like a tidal wave, and he finds himself glaring at the streets below, the sandwich still clutched between his hands.

Here he is, sitting next to Eraserhead on a roof like they've done a hundred times before, eating *breakfast* like he's not currently in the middle of a mid-life crisis. And yes, he's going to call it a mid-life crisis because he's not sure what part of his life could be considered the middle. In fact, now that he's thought about it, he's going to have an *ongoing* crisis.

Eraserhead chews on his own sandwich for a bit—turkey with mayo and mustard, Izuku guesses, as that's what he always gets—before glancing at him. "Came across a few villains tied up at a convenience store a couple blocks away. Was that you?"

Izuku is brought out of his thinking momentarily. "Uh, yeah, that was —that was me, I think." He laughs awkwardly. "Can't really remember right now."

Did he do that? Probably. His knuckles burn a little bit. His gloves only offer so much protection when he punches with his enhancements.

Eraserhead quirks a brow. "You alright?"

Izuku opens his mouth but nothing comes out, the weight of everything crashing down and constricting his throat.

He's *not.*

Izuku's breaths suddenly come shallow, too shallow. He can barely breathe anymore. But he sits there, face perfectly expressionless, body as still as possible while he's *suffocating,* knowing the man beside him can feel every centimeter of his movements, every single one of his tells.

They've known each other for quite a while now. Izuku doesn't want to lie, but he also doesn't want to appear weak. Because *damn it all* he should not be stressing this much over All Might's question; a question that should be easy for Izuku to answer. Why can't he just say no? It's

the only option for him. The only choice.

His mind is telling him that it's a bad idea, that this hesitance of his will get him killed, that he'll hurt All Might, he'll hurt everyone. But his instincts are screaming at him to just accept it, because *don't you want it? Don't you want that power?*

The voice at the back of his head is back, and it's louder than ever. *You're not stealing it. He's practically begging for you to take it. Do him a favor and just say yes. You want it.*

"Kid?"

Izuku grits his teeth. He recognizes the tone and doesn't quite care for it. It's the tone Eraserhead uses to calm down civilians after rescuing them from a burning building or something. It's not soft, but it doesn't hold his usual gruffness either.

The hero is using that voice on Izuku now, and the boy doesn't like it. "I'm good," he grits out. Because he is. He's okay. As much as he can be, at least.

"Rabbit, are you—"

"Can I ask you a question?"

Eraserhead's gaze burns his skin, but the boy can't bring himself to meet it just yet. He takes the silence as a cue to continue, so he does.

"If someone offers you something that you know you shouldn't have, like you *really* shouldn't have it, but you *really* really want it—what do you do? Is there even a choice at that point?"

The sudden silence that follows his outburst stretches on for a good ten seconds, and Izuku winces. Just as he's about to open his mouth to say *forget about it, I'm stupid, don't listen to me,* Eraserhead speaks.

"I guess it depends on what that something is. For example," he tilts his head, "drugs."

Izuku chokes at the randomness, the sandwich very nearly falling out of his hands when he glares at the man. "What, no! It's not—it's not *drugs.* Why do you always assume that?"

"I don't. Just wanted to bring you back to yourself."

And *oh.* Izuku's eyes fall back to the ground, listening to the hero eat

the last bite of his turkey sandwich before crumpling up the wrapper and shoving it in his pocket.

(Eraserhead is not, in fact, a litterbug. He's lectured Izuku twice before for throwing something on the ground during patrol. It's safe to say that Izuku doesn't litter anymore, and sometimes he even finds himself yelling at other people who do it.)

"Finish your food before it gets cold," the man orders, pointing to Izuku's own sandwich.

Izuku fights the urge to roll his eyes. It was already cold, he wants to say, but stops himself. He's definitely not ungrateful. And besides, egg and cheese sandwiches taste better cold. He will die on that hill before admitting otherwise.

"And to answer your other question," Eraserhead continues. "There's always a choice. It doesn't matter what anyone says you shouldn't do or have. The only thing you should consider is if *you* know you shouldn't have it." He stretches, his back popping a couple times. "But even then, most people are biased against themselves. I'm assuming you either can't or won't tell me what it is, right?"

Izuku just nods, feeling the tightness in his chest loosen up as he listens to Eraserhead's voice. The man is smart; he's logical. If Izuku wants anyone's advice, it's his.

"Okay. So I can't really tell you anything of use. What I can tell you, however, is that sometimes it's not always a bad thing to have something you think you shouldn't. Some of the best things in my life have come to me when I thought I'd be best without them."

Is it just Izuku, or is Eraserhead speaking almost wistfully now? He sounds fucking ancient.

"That being said," the hero nudges his shoulder, "do what you want to do. Just make sure you're safe, alright?"

Safe. Will Izuku be safe if he says yes? His first answer is no, not in a million years. Not with who he is and what he was made to be. But the more he thinks about it, the more Izuku realizes that maybe this isn't such a bad idea. The more he realizes that One for All will make him *stronger*. He can—he can protect himself, right? From who, he isn't quite sure.

And more than that, he can protect others. Sure, he's doing that right

now, even when technically being a criminal. He's helping others, and that's enough for the moment. But in the long run, what good is he doing against top-tier villains? Against people like All for One?

Nothing. He's not strong enough for that. He won't be, not ever. But with One for All...

Is this selfish? Wanting a power he's not supposed to have just because of his blood? Wanting another quirk on top of the other *stolen* ones?

Izuku isn't the one who stole them, at least not all of them, but that doesn't really matter. What matters is that All Might *chose* him, so that has to mean something.

Or maybe Izuku is looking too far into this and All Might really is desperate. Maybe he doesn't really see Izuku for who he is, he just sees him as a potential vessel.

But would that be unfair to say about the man? With how much time he's put into Izuku?

"What's that on your wrist?"

The boy brightens up immediately, pushing aside his rising panic. So what if Eraserhead is just trying to distract him? He's grateful for it. "It's my new AI. Do you like her? I made her myself!"

"Holy shit, kid." Eraserhead leans closer to peer at the small screen on the boy's forearm. "From scratch?"

"I mean, I stole a few things from some dumpsters, but I put it all together."

The man laughs quietly. "'Course you did. What can it do?"

"It's a her! She's named AINA. Short for Artificial and Intelligent Notification Analyst. A mouthful, I know." Izuku taps on the screen, giggling at the surprised look that crosses Eraserhead's face when the device flashes to life as a mini hologram. "I programmed her to be kind of like a phone, but she can do a lot more than that. She has access to the internet, like most things, but she also has a mind of her own. Here, say something!"

Izuku disables the earbud feature and holds out his arm, gesturing for the hero to speak.

Eraserhead blinks at him in disbelief. “Uh, hello?”

“Welcome, Eraserhead. What activities would you like me to complete today?”

The hero tenses, causing Izuku to immediately wince. “Ah, should’ve warned you first. When I said she has access to the internet, I mean she has access to *everything* on the internet. She knows your real name, too, hope you don’t mind.”

“Guess I don’t have a choice,” he says, though he doesn’t sound upset. “I’m more surprised at how she recognized my voice.”

“Oh, she’s called an analyst for a reason! She can go through any security footage and match up faces with voices and stuff. Didn’t take me a while to get her coding done, but integrating her into my house and device here was a pain in the ass.”

Eraserhead hums. “That’s a lot of talent, kid. You’d make a damn good support hero.”

Support hero. The words hit him like freight train. *Holy fuck, why didn’t I think of that? I could make devices for other heroes and wouldn’t even have to use my quirks.*

Damnit. Maybe he should’ve applied for the support course. That would’ve been easier to juggle with the rest of his chaotic life.

When Izuku tunes back in, Eraserhead is already standing up. He looks to have been scrolling through the options and capabilities AINA has while Izuku was dissociating.

“It’s already past two, so I’ve gotta go, alright? My patrol ends soon.” He waits for Izuku to scramble up as well before holding eye contact with him. “Just remember what I said before. Be careful, but do what you think is right. You’ve got a good head, so I know you can do that, problem child.”

It’s said so casually that Izuku almost misses the nickname. He doesn’t whine or complain at the jab, but he does stop and stare at the man for a moment. Because why did that make him *happy?*

Eraserhead flicks one of the ears on Izuku’s hoodie, causing the boy to give a small smile underneath the mask. And maybe it’s still too sharp, and maybe it still doesn’t quite reach his eyes, but it’s altogether better than the ones he usually wears these days.

Izuku is breathing easier now. He doesn't feel that impending doom crushing him like how he felt just half an hour before. He feels lighter, if only by a little.

Eraserhead rests a heavy hand on Izuku's head before leaving, and the boy knows there's a chance when he doesn't automatically flinch away this time.

Maybe he has a choice in this after all.

"No. I refuse to fucking believe that shit's real!" Kacchan stands up from the couch and storms to the kitchen, probably to go aggressively help Mitsuki with dinner. "There's no fucking way you got that high of a score!"

Izuku, who's sporting a shit-eating grin, just shrugs. "Projector All Might doesn't lie, Kacchan."

The blond appears in the doorway again. "Bullshit! A hundred and ninety eight? You had to have cheated. Don't fucking spew that crap to me."

"I think you're just jealous that I beat you by, what is it, one hundred and twenty-one points?"

"And that's *part* of the bullshit!" He stomps over and takes the projector from Izuku's hands. "Fucking piece of *shit."*

Izuku giggles. "I told you what I did. That's not cheating."

"I want to see the footage. I won't believe any of that shit until I *see* it."

"They don't just give that out, Kacchan. You'll be waiting a long time."

"Son of a—"

Izuku uses *Pull* just in time to grab the projector before Kacchan can

smash it into the ground. “Hey, watch it! You don’t know if we have to send them back or not! It looks expensive!”

His friend just rolls his eyes. “It said on the package we can keep it for memorabilia, dumbass. Now let me break it.”

“Uh, no? This one’s mine! You have your own to destroy!”

“I don’t care!” Kacchan grabs for it again, but Izuku just steps back and sticks his leg out. The blond trips and face plants into the couch, curses getting louder. “You fucking shitty nerd! Give it to me!”

“Fuck off!”

Izuku tries to run for it, but Kacchan is already balancing on the armrest like an angry cat. The blond jumps on his back and sends them both crashing to the floor.

Damn. I’m so glad I didn’t bring Missy. She’d get her fur scorched off.

Izuku rolls over to dislodge him, but Kacchan is still much bigger than him. Using a little bit of power, the green-haired boy knees him right where it hurts and shoves him off. He goes skidding into the dining room, face murderous.

Oh fuck.

Their scuffle turns into more of a brawl. Mitsuki joins in at one point to kick them out of the kitchen after they almost knock a boiling pot of water out of her hands. How they even migrated to the kitchen in the first place is beyond Izuku, but oh well.

“Come on,” Kacchan says, dragging him outside. “We’re settling this right now. I’m gonna beat you, and then you have to admit that I’m better.”

Izuku crosses his arms and digs his feet into the ground. “Nope. Just look at my points. I don’t gotta prove *shit.”*

In the next second, Izuku is letting out an *oof* as a fist hits his back and sends him falling forward. He chokes on a mouthful of dirt before groaning. The quick defeat doesn’t come as much of a surprise. The boy hasn’t slept in two days. He’s starting to hallucinate now. He *swears* there was a clown right behind Kacchan a few seconds ago, but he isn’t gonna be the one to point it out if it wasn’t true.

Hopefully he can rest later. It's not even Thursday, and yet he's still here.

He received the projector a few hours before now in the mail. The address he put down on his application is the same address he led Eraserhead to all those months ago during their first encounter. The lady at the front desk had called him after seeing his name on the package.

While he was definitely excited, Izuku forced himself to wait until he got to Kacchan's house to open it and compare. The only bad thing about his is that he didn't ace his written exam. He missed only a few points, all of them from History.

Figures.

Kacchan promised that he'll keep rubbing it in his face for the rest of time, as *he* aced it, of course. He's always been the more studious of the two, especially when it comes to History.

What made Izuku blush was the fact that the brunette girl (the one who saved him *twice,* which Kacchan has helpfully reminded him of every second after watching the projector) wanted to share some of her points with him. Izuku certainly didn't need it, but he's happy all the same. He never thought anyone would do something like that for him.

But all the same, he was incredibly grateful when Present Mic made her keep her hard-earned points.

During all of this fighting and teasing with each other, however, Izuku still doesn't breathe a word to Kacchan about the offer All Might gave him. He should. He really should. That's one of the reasons he even came over to the Bakugou household.

But now that he's actually here, he stays quiet. The guilt is strong in his chest, but Izuku bites his tongue. He'll see how it goes first, and then he'll tell his friend.

That's Izuku's promise to him.

He can't believe he's actually doing this. He has to be crazy. Certifiably insane, in fact.

Why did he agree to this celebration brunch with All Might in the first place? He texted the man his scores (even though he's pretty sure the hero already knew) and was surprised when the man texted him back enthusiastically.

He insisted that they had to celebrate this feat of his, seeing as he apparently made a new record.

Honestly, Izuku can kind of care less about that. The only thing he cares about is the obvious question he's going to have to answer today. The question that he *does* surprisingly have a set answer for.

He blames Kacchan for this situation, too. It's one hundred percent the boy's fault. No, he will not take criticism. He can still recall his friend's stubbornness just the day before.

"Kacchan. Yes or no."

There's a grunt from below him. Izuku is currently balancing on his friend's back with one hand while reading a book in the other. His sweat drips onto the pages, which is frankly disgusting. Izuku will definitely cringe over it later.

The blond is doing push-ups, still holding steady with Izuku's added weight. They've been training for almost an hour now, but neither are ready to give in. "The fuck are you on about, Deku?"

"Just answer the question! Yes or no!"

"Why should I? I don't even know what it's for!"

Izuku wriggles a little in air, trying to throw his friend off kilter. "Just do it!"

"Fine!" Kacchan drops low to the floor in one abrupt movement, causing Izuku to tumble off of him. "Yes."

And huh? Izuku is confused and also irritated. That's not what he's supposed to say. Not at all.

“No. You have to say no, Kacchan. Say it.”

“Well now that you’re so damn upset about it, my answer’s gonna stay yes.”

“Fuck you! Say no!”

“Yes.”

Izuku throws dirt at him, only to end up eating it for the second time that day.

That entire conversation had been unfair. Kacchan is stupid, and so is Izuku.

He had it all planned out. He had a poll going on in his head, for god’s sake. Eraserhead, for one, said yes—well, technically. He told Izuku to do whatever and to not be afraid to branch out, which is the closest thing to a yes he’ll ever get from the hero.

Izuku already put in his vote: a hard no. Which means Kacchan was the tiebreaker; a terrible decision, really.

He expected him to say no. Hell, Kacchan’s entire personality is like the word *no* printed in large font and highlighted in the blood of the innocent.

And so Kacchan saying yes in that determined tone of his had Izuku thinking the world was coming to an end.

The two idiots didn’t even know what they were saying yes to! They couldn’t have possibly guessed that Izuku was using them to decide whether or not to accept the Symbol of Peace’s quirk. They were answering it blindly.

Which makes it all even worse.

“This place is really nice,” Izuku whispers. He is *not* hiding behind Small Might, thank you very much. He’s just a little cold and needs some warmth.

Saying that the restaurant is nice is an understatement. It’s a very *expensive* restaurant. One that Izuku doesn’t dare look at when he walks past sometimes on the way to the store. He’s gotten dirty looks from the people going inside plenty of times, but it’s different when you’re receiving those looks while going *in* as well.

To be fair, Small Might had told him to dress casually. And so here Izuku is, in Kacchan's red jeans and dirty converse with an oversized white hoodie on top—an outfit that is not suitable for a place like this.

The hero himself is wearing some nice slacks and a comfy dress shirt, but otherwise he looks casual. Izuku, on the other hand, looks like he just got dragged out of the dumpster wearing okay-ish clothes from a lost and found bin at an orphanage.

I should've borrowed Kacchan's gel. My hair looks like a bush.

Small Might had waited for him outside of the restaurant since he was the one who made the reservation. He didn't say anything bad about the boy's looks, besides a sputtered response after noting the *Plus Ultra!* on his hoodie, but still.

While Izuku knows the man doesn't care, he still can't help but feel very out of place.

The hostess leads them to the second floor and gives them a table with a nice view of the city with a floor-to-ceiling window.

Ah. This is definitely where rich business people meet.

Apparently All Might goes here all the time with his friends, which explains why he looks so at home. The man proceeds to talk to Izuku about random things, and also about how he's thinking of getting a pet.

This prompts Izuku to show him a picture of Missy. He's talked about her before but never actually shown her to the man. It turns out that he's actually a dog person, though, so Izuku starts to babble on about the different shelters he's been too while picking up strays off the street.

If Izuku is being honest, he's been *this* close to adopting more stray animals after finding them during his patrols. The only thing stopping him is the fact that he can barely afford to feed himself with Missy there, so how could he afford another animal?

Izuku is relaxing slowly, now. There's quite a few people here, so he makes a game of searching through their quirks and trying to identify what it does just by feeling the energy. He does this all the time, and it's quite fun. Malicious, perhaps, but fun.

When the waiter comes back with their drinks and takes their orders, Izuku just gets what All Might does since he still feels very out of place. Sashimi seems to be a popular dish here.

Izuku doesn't really like raw meat in general, but he knows it must taste good for how expensive it is, so he doesn't mind.

"I've always wondered how you eat without a stomach," Izuku says, hoping to start another conversation. He's starting to get sick of the looks from all the people around them.

Small Might chuckles and delves into the story of how he had to get said organ removed before getting a replacement. He talks about how he's limited to eating certain things now—spicy foods are a no-go, for one—and has to go to the doctor's every month to make sure everything is going fine.

Izuku listens with awe as he nibbles on his food, and he wishes he had his notebook on him because that's *definitely* something he should put on the hero's page.

Also. How the *fuck* is All Might even alive?

The brunch is turning out nice, Izuku won't lie. Well, he could be doing anything with All Might and it would probably be enjoyable, but whatever. Everything is nice.

The air is a little tense, however. Only for Izuku.

The boy has to say something. All Might hasn't mentioned anything about their previous conversation, but Izuku knows he's waiting for an answer. He's not dumb. Izuku can see what ulterior motives lie behind the idea of a *celebration brunch,* as he called it.

It's when All Might orders dessert for Izuku despite his pleadings of *you don't have to, really, that's a lot of money* that the boy finally works up the courage to tell him.

At first, the hero looks confused as to what he's talking about, though Izuku did just blurt out *yes!* seemingly out of nowhere, so you can't really blame him.

All Might's eyes widen in realization after a few moments, and then he's talking excitedly, almost too quickly for Izuku to keep up with, and that's saying something.

Again, Izuku is reminded of how much of a happy golden retriever the man can be.

After the rambling is seemingly over and the dessert has already made its way onto the table, All Might tells him that they can do the transfer right after this, saying that it's better to get an early start since school starts very soon.

Izuku hates how easily he matches the hero's enthusiasm and agrees.

And somewhere, not too far from the restaurant All Might and Midoriya Izuku are dining at, a faceless man grins.

The tubes in his chest will only subdue him for a little while longer. His treatments are almost finished, and it won't be long before he can continue where he left off. And then he can take back what's his.

He can take back both of them.

Chapter End Notes

s

complications

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku is glad that All Might suggested they wait until after the celebration brunch to do the transfer. He is so, *so* glad.

He doesn't think he could've handled the prying gazes from the other diners for much longer. Judgmental fuckers, aren't they? All of them. But besides the uncomfortable staring, he's also glad they left because they kind of need more privacy for this. A crowded restaurant isn't exactly the best place to discuss an age-old secret that has the capability of destroying Japan if discovered by the wrong people.

There's no telling who's watching anymore. Hell, the fucking *waiter* could've been a spy, though he hadn't raised any red flags in Izuku's mind. And trust him, the boy had watched the man very carefully. He'd watched *everyone* very carefully.

You can never be too cautious.

They're back at Dagobah beach, standing on the roof of a secluded pavilion for no specific reason. Izuku just likes to be up high, and he only offered one excuse to the hero, saying that the beach has been getting crowded nowadays and they should be where no one can see them. The man had accepted the reasoning with no problem, and so here they are.

The sun is beating down on them at this time of day, as it's always the hottest during the afternoon. Izuku shamefully admits to himself that he just wants this over with, despite *Extract* being very excited about getting another quirk. It's almost like his given quirk is alive and can read his thoughts, which is kind of scary. Because for one, how does it know? And two, why is it getting happy when it's not even going to be used in the transfer? Izuku doesn't need to steal One for All, not that he'd ever in any other circumstance.

But Izuku can't lie and say he's not a bit excited about this either. He can't wait to see what the new quirk will do to his existing ones. He's practically vibrating with nerves.

That is until All Might holds out his fist and says, with as much conviction as twelve thousand burning stars: *"Eat this!"*

Izuku is, again, *very* glad that they're alone, as the noise that comes out of his mouth is one that will embarrass him until the day he dies. He clears his throat to speak. "Eh?"

All Might lifts his fist up a little higher to show the golden strand of hair that's floating in the faint breeze. He looks suddenly sheepish, and he rubs at the back of his neck in a way that Izuku's come to realize as the hero trying to find the right words.

"To inherit my power you have to have some of my DNA," he explains, almost confusedly. "That's how the transfer works, my boy. I told you this, did I not?"

Izuku blinks once, then twice. "Well, yeah, but I just... didn't think it would be this way."

"Well, what were you expecting?"

The boy's mind instantly goes blank. What *had* he been expecting? It's not like there are many other options for DNA transfers.

"Uh, I don't know. Maybe a blood transfusion?"

He gets a frown in return. "I thought you didn't like doctors, my boy?"

"I don't," Izuku confirms, though he's surprised the man actually remembers that bit of information. The boy himself can't even recall when he'd told the hero that. "But this still isn't exactly how I imagined it."

"So, do you still want my quirk?"

Not really.

"Yes."

"Then let's not waste time! Come on, Young Midoriya, eat!"

Izuku takes an instinctive step back when the hero lifts his hand up again. "Actually, on second thought, I—"

"Eat, my boy!" All Might practically shoves the hair in his face. "Eat!"

"Wait, this isn't—"

"Eat!"

The boy's screams can be heard all the way from the city.

"Stop laughing! It's not funny."

Ms. Hanako merely laughs harder at Izuku's pout. She doubles over, clutching her stomach with a frail arm. "You accidentally ate his hair? Oh my, dearie, that sounds quite interesting."

"It was *traumatizing!"* He corrects, still mildly offended.

"Don't be so dramatic," Ayaka says, voice heavy with amusement. "Now tell me, what did it taste like?"

Izuku glares at her. "You too? Please, somebody end me."

Ms. Hanako thankfully takes pity on him, and the older woman sends a mischievous look at her daughter. "Now, Ayaka, don't tease him too much. I'm sure it was a rather unpleasant feeling."

"What, like a worm? Or more like string cheese gone wrong?"

Izuku gags. "Please don't! I can still feel it stuck in my throat!"

The two women laugh louder and continue talking, and Izuku can only pretend he's annoyed by it. He's busy putting mini slices of pepperoni on a small pizza, along with some banana peppers and other meats, and once he's done he slides it into the oven.

The shop is closing up earlier than usual today, so he'd stopped by to help them with the last orders. He's been visiting them less and less with everything that's been going on, and he's happy he was finally able to find some time to be with Ms. Hanako.

His jobs are coming more frequently, and it's hard to pass them up when he's already barely scraping by with the money he has.

He moves on to the appetizers as Ms. Hanako goes to the dining area

to wait more tables.

Ayaka squeezes past him to get to the soda dispensers. “So, when are ya bringing that kitten of yours?”

“She’s not really a kitten. The vet said she’s just over a year old.”

The woman hums but doesn’t look away from her work. “Vet? I thought you couldn’t afford a vet?”

“I can’t.” He grins. “I guilt-tripped the receptionist lady at one of the walk-in offices to get a free checkup.”

There are only a few circumstances where manipulation is good, Izuku thinks. That being one of them.

“Why am I not surprised?”

Izuku giggles. “In my defense, I had to make sure Missy was healthy. Being on the streets for most of her life isn’t good for her health.”

“Guess not.” Ayaka takes the pizza he prepared out of the oven and sets it on the counter, ringing the bell once to let Ms. Hanako know it’s ready to be sent out. “Say, what was that you were talking about with Mom? Something about UA?”

Glad that they have something else to speak about, Izuku excitedly chatters about the entrance exam and his results. He can’t tell them much about All Might and *how* exactly he came to eating the hero's hair, but he can tell them whatever he wants about UA.

While it’s good that Ms. Hanako and the rest of the family won’t push him about certain things, Izuku can’t help but feel kind of guilty for not telling them everything. He knows they get it, and he also knows that he’s putting everyone in danger when he tells them *anything* about All Might or himself, but he just can’t stop.

They’ve shared so much with him, it’s only fair that they know a bit about some of his own life, even if it’s just a little. He doesn’t like being dishonest, despite how much he seems to lie all the time, whether it’s to himself or to the authorities. It makes him feel dirty. Almost like a villain.

And yet, just like any other form of manipulation, he can’t help the lying. Or, rather, the evasion.

It's an hour into work when the restaurant closes for the day. Izuku helps wash the remaining dishes and hums softly to himself, swaying his head to the tune of a classical song playing on an old radio in the corner.

Ms. Hanako joins him in cleaning up the kitchen. It seems Ayaka already left. "What's on your mind, honey?"

"Hm? Nothing. I'm just a bit tired, 's all."

The woman narrows her eyes. "I have plenty of years behind me to know when somebody's lying, child. But as long as you're alright, that's all I can ask."

Izuku sighs to himself. There it is again: the deception. He finds lying easy, he truly does. It's almost natural for him to spin any web of lies off his tongue and pass it as the truth, but that doesn't make it any less shameful to do. It's especially difficult when he lies to someone who truly *cares* about him.

He wishes they didn't. It would be so much easier that way.

"I just—" He cuts himself off and then frowns. "You remember Kacchan, right?"

A small snort. "How could I not? That boy manages to blow something up every time he comes in here."

Izuku shivers at the reminder and continues to wipe down the stoves. "Well, I haven't been entirely honest with him either about this whole thing, and I feel pretty bad about it." He pauses for a moment, deep in thought. "He's my friend. Shouldn't I be telling him about all this?"

Shouldn't I tell him that I now have the quirk of our shared idol? The man we've both looked up to for the majority of our lives?

The woman tuts. "Well, friendship is based on trust, isn't it? I'm sure you have your reasons for keeping quiet, but I'll tell you this: lying to the ones you love never turns out well. They'll figure it out eventually, and it might not end pretty. For both sides, in fact."

"I know, but I still can't help but feel like something bad will happen if I tell him. It's like—it's like a gut feeling, I guess."

"Are you afraid of what he'll say?" She cocks a hip. "Or of what you *think* he'll say?"

And if he's being honest with himself, it's definitely the latter, but again, Izuku isn't always honest. Even when it only concerns himself.

"I... I'm not really sure. Maybe both? I know he'll have some strong opinions about it, but I kinda already expect that from him." He wipes his hands on a towel and faces her. "What do you, um, think I should do? You don't have to answer, I just don't know what—"

Ms. Hanako doesn't hesitate. Her eyes are as kind and intelligent as always. "I think you should confide in your friend, seeing as you don't have many at the moment. You never know when you might lose him."

And alright, that makes him feel like shit. The boy knows she's talking from experience.

"But," she continues. "You shouldn't push yourself too hard. If it's a gut feeling, listen to it. You know your own boundaries."

Do I? Or am I just being paranoid like I am with everything?

The truth is that he doesn't want to put Kacchan in danger. Sure, he's already in danger. Since the moment they met when they were just babies, Kacchan has been in danger. But Izuku doesn't want to make that worse.

He doesn't tell Ms. Hanako and Ayaka everything because they're *fine* with not knowing, they *understand.*

But Kacchan is different. He understands, of course, but he doesn't seem to care about that. He's always been stubborn, and he's always wanted to be involved. That's not necessarily a bad thing, it just makes Izuku feel like shit when he's faced with situations like this.

If he tells Kacchan about One for All, his friend might become a target. The less he knows, the better. But there's also that sinking feeling in Izuku's heart that tells him that if he were in Kacchan's shoes (hey, he'd grow a couple inches), that he'd want to know about it as well.

And so, to put it simply, everything is fucked. Izuku is either a shitty person who puts their friend in harm's way by telling him a secret, or a shitty person who lies to their friend and acts like nothing's changed. There's no in-between.

Christ. The quirk hasn't even set in yet and Izuku is already panicking.

He's been doing that a lot lately, it seems.

"I'll be heading out now. Everything's finished here, so just make sure to lock the back doors when you leave, alright?"

Izuku nods his head even though he can barely hear her over the fuzz in his ears.

He has to get himself together.

Spying on people is fun. Especially when you're getting paid to do it.

Now don't get the wrong idea. Izuku isn't a stalker, per se. He just likes to study people. He likes to keep tabs on his clients to make sure they're safe, of course, and he also does it as insurance in case something goes wrong.

But he doesn't just spy on his clients, he spies on everyone he's ever come into contact with, either as Rabbit or as Midoriya Izuku. It's a precaution, in a way, and it's also just to give Izuku more leverage. It's something he can use as a bargaining chip whenever he gets himself into a sticky situation.

He tracks their movements, their battles, their weaknesses, you name it. He knows their friends and finances, their every indiscretion. Hell, he even knows the color of their underwear!

This guy, for example, doesn't wear any. Not that he needs the added protection down there; the dude doesn't have the balls to do much of anything good.

Izuku is currently crouching in the rafters of a nearby tower, spying on the wealthy businessman drinking champagne in the building over. He's in one of his many penthouses, chatting with a coworker.

This *coworker* of his has been coming over very often. Over the past few days, Izuku has come to realize that their relationship goes much

deeper than what the man would probably like anyone to know.

He's not meant to take him down or extract him from his location. The client that gave Izuku this job only wants information on the target, at least for now. Izuku didn't ask any questions, not when he'd seen the number of zeroes after the first number on the promised check.

Sometimes it's best not to know what he's getting himself into. It's not like he's going to murder the guy, nor is he going to give away top secret information.

The businessman is cheating on his wife, that's all. Not to say that that's okay! It's just that things could be a lot worse. That little bit of information, however, will make Izuku's client very happy. It's an easy way to take down politicians and people of high power.

"AINA," the boy whispers, detaching the armband and holding it up like a camera phone at the window. "Can you zoom in for me?"

"Of course. Would you like to send this footage directly to your pinned contact?"

Izuku smirks to himself. "Why not? Give him a live shot."

He might enjoy ruining politicians' lives a little too much.

The thing is that Izuku can figure out a lot about his targets in a short amount of time. It's even easier now with AINA, who can search all the records with this guy's name and billing information. It seems he dabbles into the Black Market almost just as much as he cheats on his wife.

Which, for one, is kind of creepy, and for two, only adds to his rich boy-slash-douchebag personality.

Even Izuku doesn't spend ten hours a day surfing the dark web, and he does that pretty often to get the best deals on mechanical parts and weapons.

This guy is sick, so Izuku is glad his client brought this to his attention. Even if he doesn't get paid for the extra work, Izuku is going to make sure this man gets arrested. Hm. He should probably text Eraserhead or Tsukauchi about it. They'd be within legal grounds to take him down with the evidence Izuku has.

It might be faulty evidence since he isn't obtaining it legally, but

nobody has to know that.

Speaking of Eraserhead, Izuku hasn't seen the underground hero in a few days. Their meeting is coming up soon, so he's looking forward to it. He wants to hear the man's voice again.

Does that make me clingy? The hell is wrong with me.

It's been a few hours after the transfer with All Might, and the sun is starting to go down. Izuku can *feel* the quirk taking effect. It's almost scary.

Of course, he'd felt the change immediately after inhaling the hair due to *Extract* and it's sensory awareness, but he's only just now feeling the power of it. And *oh boy* can he feel it.

Something itches at the back of his throat, and Izuku frowns a little. When he coughs into his hand he can see little specks of blood on his palm.

He knows instantly why that's happening, so he doesn't freak out too bad.

Extract used to do that to him all the time when he was younger. The quirk basically forces him to take other people's powers, and so when he doesn't, *he's* the one who pays for it. He's scared Kacchan and the rest of the Bakugou family plenty of times like that before.

It hasn't done it in forever, not since... not since he *acquired* the multiple quirks he has now. It calmed down after that happened. And for it to be starting up again now, that can only mean one thing: One for All is indeed strengthening his other quirks.

And *fuck,* that's a great thing; that's exactly what he'd been hoping for out of all this. But that's also a very, very *bad* thing.

That bad feeling he gets with *Extract* now will only grow exponentially with this new addition, and Izuku suddenly realizes how fucked he really is. The sudden increase in strength and power in his core is making him feel a little dizzy, and he has to shake himself out of his thoughts to focus on reality.

It's time that he experiments a bit.

"AINA, initiate Shutdown Protocol Four, please!"

Instead of a verbal response, the AI just flashes the words *of course, I'll speak with you later, Izuku,* before shutting off completely. He fluffs out his unkempt hair to hide the earbuds before dropping down from the rafters. He's on the top floor of this building, and there's nobody there since it's usually reserved for business meetings. He'd done quite a bit of research on this company before sneaking in, just to make sure.

He smooths out his clothes a little bit since he's not even in his Rabbit costume and takes the elevator down to the bottom level. It's almost laughable how easy it was to bypass their security. He didn't even need to mess with their cameras and stuff, he just had to create a diversion so he could get past the guard just inside the front doors.

The same guard that's staring at Izuku in utter disbelief as the boy slips out of the doors. He doesn't dare stop him, though.

Like Izuku said. Pathetically laughable.

What makes it worse is that the company is all about home and cyber security. Yeah. Not too secure, huh?

The sky is pitch black by the time he puts a halt to his other spying deals and stops on top of another building, this time for a different reason. He wants to get a feel for things. The transfer is complete by now, he knows it. It has to be with the sudden giddiness he's experiencing.

He can feel the energy buzzing under his skin. It's so much stronger than his usual enhancements. He's almost drunk off the feeling, and his previous dizziness makes way for euphoria as he tests out *Boost* in his legs and feet. It's obviously different: it's stronger. He can run quicker than before.

Not by too much, but the change is noticeable enough. If Izuku wanted to, he could train himself to go a little farther. He could be even *faster.*

Boost isn't the only quirk affected, just as he thought. He'll have to find time to test out his other powers and write down his findings, but for now, Izuku wants to try out the newest addition to his quirks.

The one that matters the most, now. By far. He has to protect this one more than the others, that's for sure. It holds the greatest face value, and also the greatest personal value. There's no way he's going to let this one slip out from his grasp now that he's got it.

He holds up a fist and glances around, trying to find a nice target for practice. What better time for training is there than right now, on a deserted rooftop at just a little past ten at night? Anyone could see him if they really looked.

He doesn't know exactly how to activate One for All. It sounds silly, but the only information All Might offered him on the topic was *just clench your butt cheeks and think of greatness! It'll come to you naturally, my boy!* So, yeah. He's basically starting from scratch.

He's sure it's similar to *Boost,* as they're both power types and a form of body enhancement, so it should be like powering up a battery. He just has to imagine it, right?

Izuku stands in front of a large billboard and wrinkles his nose. It's showcasing an ad on Endeavor merchandise. The flame hero doesn't get a lot of screen time on any news outlets or videos, so it's a bit of a surprise that his face is even on here.

A welcome surprise, now that Izuku can vandalize it. The hero should be grateful that the boy is too lazy to get his spray cans as well. He would've had a field day with the man's chiseled face; a face perfect for drawing dicks on.

Izuku rears back a fist and gets into a stance, his back against the billboard railing. He clenches his butt like All Might said (who knows, maybe that is how you use it) and imagines himself opening up its vast energy reserves in his mind. His heart beats a little faster inside his ribcage, and he forces himself to calm down.

He knew how to work it. He told me how to work it a long time ago. I can do this.

Izuku pictures it all in his mind, recalling terrible, terrible words of instruction, and releases everything he can as he drives his fist forward.

The huge gust of wind that follows nearly knocks him off the small ledge he's on, and Izuku has to hold on as his fist goes straight through the reinforced metal billboard with a crackle of red lightning.

Almost like it was nothing more than wet paper.

It seems to take an entire ten seconds for the air around him to return to normal, and Izuku is left reeling, eyes wide as saucers.

Oh. Wow. That was cool as fuck. And also: he hopes no one just saw that, because the billboard is fucking *destroyed,* and so is part of the building a little ways behind it—the courthouse, he realizes.

Okay, that one wasn't his fault this time.

But *fucking shit* does his arm hurt now. What in the holy hell did he just—oh. Why does his shoulder burn so much?

When Izuku looks, he's mildly surprised to see that his entire arm is mangled. He can see it better once he angles his body into the light from a nearby streetlamp. All the way from his shoulder to the tips of his fingers his skin is a deep mixture of purple and black, and the faintest bit of steam rises from the appendage. The pain is spreading like a wildfire all of a sudden, and he stumbles a little, holding back a hiss.

What the *hell* just happened? He obviously punched Endeavor in the throat, evident by how there's literally nothing left of the billboard in front of him, but how did that lead to him breaking his entire arm?

Too much power, Izuku thinks, still riding out the waves of white-hot pain that continue to course through him at different levels. He must have tried to use too much of One for All's power without any personal energy or strength to back it up. But still. Why did it recoil that much? It's an emitter type quirk, so it should have some obvious drawbacks, but not like that.

Fuck. How does All Might deal with that?

Lights flicker on in the apartments and houses around him, and Izuku scrambles down from the billboard immediately. He does not want to get caught like this, nosiree. That's a definite trip to jail if anyone who cared enough were to see him.

He won't be able to get home quickly without the use of one of his arms; his dominant arm, to be exact. He's gonna have to walk back the normal way. Just for a few minutes until he can get close.

The few people on the streets at this time of night are giving him strange looks, which only serve to piss Izuku off more. He's getting really tired of folks looking at him like that.

To be fair, his right arm is kind of mangled. They might be a little irked upon seeing that, but still. Doesn't give them the right to judge or ogle. He's not an animal. He only looks like a rat *half* the time.

“Hey, kid! What are you doing out here?”

Great. Just fan-fucking-tastic. Izuku doesn’t even have to look behind him to know it’s a cop. A new one, at that.

In this part of town, Izuku knows practically every officer and hero. He’s run into trouble with all of them at least once by now, and they all know him by name. They also know not to disturb him unless he’s doing something worse than just breaking curfew.

Which means this cop is definitely a rookie. He doesn’t know Izuku, so he won’t let him off the hook like all the other cops.

And so Izuku does the only thing he can think of: he runs. He hadn’t planned on booking it home, and yet here he is.

He’s run from so many cops and police officers in just the past couple of years alone that the process is practically ingrained into his brain by now. Get up high and don’t look back, that’s his rule.

Unless an underground hero is following you, then you’re just fucked. Getting up high doesn’t do shit. Learned that the hard way the first time around.

Detective Tsukauchi works late on these kinds of nights, and Izuku could do without a lecture right now. Running is his only option.

It turns out that the rookie cop must have been informed about him in one way or another, as he curses loudly when Izuku scales the side of a small shop and runs across the roof.

“Damn you, kid, get down!”

“No, *you* get down!”

Another curse, this one slightly more confused than before, but Izuku keeps sprinting. He has to hold onto his broken arm as he goes, which fucking *hurts*.

Time seems to blur along with the pain, and before he knows it he’s shouldering open his door after climbing the stairs and booking it to his first aid kit. He can’t do much about it right now, but he can wrap it up so he doesn't jostle it. Yeah. That sounds like a good idea.

“Hiya, Missy! Didn’t get into too much trouble while I was gone, right?”

He doesn't waste any time in feeding her after fixing up his arm, petting her all the while. He makes sure to put a dish of warm lactose-free milk on the ground beside her water as a small treat. She loves milk, and so of course he's going to spoil her with it. He doesn't use milk for anything anyway, so he doesn't bother getting the regular kind.

Most cats can't have cow milk since their digestive system can't always process it correctly. Other kinds of milk are usually best for them, and it's not like he minds spending the extra money.

He's been living off of coffee and instant ramen and rice for this long now; it's not like he needs anything else.

Using his left hand to sketch out ideas instead of his right is hard, but not as hard as he'd thought it'd be. He's not exactly ambidextrous, but he was trained on how to use his non-dominant limbs almost as easily as his other ones. He's a little thankful for that now as he lays out all the facts.

Okay, so he's not strong enough to use the full potential of One for All. The small part of Izuku's mind, the prideful part, is kind of offended by that fact, but the other part isn't all that surprised. The boy is honestly a little more disappointed in himself more than anything. It's his own fault for not being a good vessel for the quirk.

Another negative as to why I shouldn't have said yes.

But that's alright, he'll have to work up to it. The quicker the better, no matter what he has to do. He doesn't think One for All affects the metabolism, though Izuku already knows he's going to have a problem with that because of *Boost.* He's sure his hunger will spike even worse than it is.

It's a nuisance to have to keep breaking bones every time he uses it, and learning to control the output at this rate is still hazardous, so he has to create something that'll suppress it. Something that'll limit how much he can use of it, but also something that won't suppress the usage of his other quirks as well. As much as he'd like to pretend that most of those quirks don't exist, they do come in handy when he's in awful situations.

It's best to keep them ready as a backup, even if he can't use them publicly.

He also needs something that'll take off the edge of *Extract.* That's the

main thing on his mind. He can't be throwing up blood everywhere like All Might. Especially since High School starts up in spring—just a couple weeks away.

Hm. He made AINA, right? So how hard can making a quirk suppressor with that many limitations be?

A suppressor that doesn't need batteries or some other source to power it all the time, and one that won't affect his regular enhancements or quirks but affect only two in particular? Okay, so maybe it'll be a little difficult.

His eyes shift over to the extra parts and junk on his desk, and the ideas and blueprints that suddenly shoot through his mind like a slideshow causes him to shake his head. "Nothing can ever be easy for me, huh?"

Missy meows, and the boy dutifully takes that as a no.

Chapter End Notes

d

from me to you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Toshinori sees his protégé running up to him at the park only a few hours after texting the boy to meet him there, he nearly has an aneurysm. Because what the actual *hell* is Midoriya doing?

The hero deflates almost instantly with a puff of smoke and a bloody cough, which is probably for the best seeing as he's in public and not hidden from any wandering eyes. Now isn't the time for any media attention or impromptu interviews.

His gaze immediately zeroes in on Midoriya's right arm, which is covered in what looks like cheap bandages from a discount store. It looks like an entire roll of medical tape has been haphazardly wrapped around his arm, not close at all to the level of care one should normally use when dealing with an injury of that degree. The boy's entire limb is hanging limply at his side and swinging with every stride.

It's sickening, if Toshinori is being honest, and that's saying something considering he's seen and had his own fair share of horrible wounds.

Why is he running with an injury like that? Is he insane!

"Woah, kid!" He stumbles toward the boy, waving his hands frantically to get him to halt. "What are you *doing?"*

Midoriya stops immediately and takes a tiny step away from the hero. "Huh?" He winces suddenly, green eyes flashing. "Ah, sorry! Did—did I do something wrong?"

He says it like he's unsure, like he thinks he's going to get yelled at for whatever he thinks he's done. The thought makes something weird coil in Toshinori's stomach, because why would the boy ever feel like that with him? Toshinori has never raised his voice at him, nor has he ever raised a hand against him outside of sparring. In fact, the only time the man has ever so much as raised his voice was when the kid refused to take a break that one day when he looked to be on the verge of passing out, and even then Toshinori had only done so to get his attention.

He's never *truly* yelled at Midoriya before, nor does he ever want to. So seeing the boy cower like that, as if he thinks he's done something wrong, breaks Toshinori's heart.

"No, my boy, of course not, but—*your arm!* How did this even happen?" He closes the distance between them again and carefully takes hold of his wrist, not missing the grimace the kid makes. "You were just fine yesterday!"

The boy rubs at his neck with his good hand. "I, uh, tried it out like you told me to."

"One for All?" Toshinori asks, horrified. "You broke your arm using *One for All?"*

"Er, yes? Was I... not supposed to?"

And oh god, is he seriously asking that? Toshinori is so stupid, so *unequivocally* stupid that it's almost funny. But in this current situation, the hero can't bring himself to laugh.

"I am so sorry, my boy," he says instead. He gently releases the wrist and shakes his head. "I should've warned you about the repercussions of using One for All. You see, I had been under the assumption that your previous enhancements would have already strengthened your body."

Midoriya tips his head, quick to catch on. "So this is normal?" he asks.

What irks Toshinori is that he doesn't sound apprehensive or disappointed when he asks—merely curious. As if the answer to that question doesn't really matter as long as the kid can get some interesting information out of it.

"Well, not really," the hero tries. "When my master passed One for All down to me, I could use it almost perfectly immediately after receiving it. I fortunately never had an issue with breaking my limbs." He sighs and takes another look at the boy's bandaged arm. "But it seems I was incorrect in my assumptions. Your body is still too small to use it at full power."

For a moment, Midoriya looks indignant, as if he's about to protest the comment about his size, but then he thinks better of it. "That can be fixed though, right?"

Still so keen. There's a reason I chose you as my successor.

"Of course, but unless you can make yourself grow bigger, Young Midoriya, I don't think there is a quick remedy for this." Toshinori smiles at him. "It will take a lot more training, though I'm sure it won't be too much of a challenge for you. You just have to work at it, and eventually, I think One for All will grow alongside you."

The boy nods, seemingly deep in thought. "That's what I was thinking, too. It might take a while, but if you think I can do it, then I'll try my hardest!"

Toshinori looks at Midoriya, noting how the sun shines on his face and reflects in his eyes, and suddenly he sees himself. The hero swears he remembers saying something like that to his own master a long time ago, back when she was still alive, and doesn't *that* make him feel old.

Warmth blooms inside his chest, and it has nothing to do with the humidity of the park around them.

"We can work out the details of this new training later, as I'm curious to see how much of One for All you can use at this very moment, but first." The hero hopes he sounds firm as he continues. "We must get that injury of yours treated, and soon. UA is close by, and I know Recovery Girl is on the job at all times; I can take you there."

As expected, Midoriya stiffens at the mere mention of the last part. "I don't like doctors."

"I'm aware, my boy, but this isn't something you can deal with yourself. You should have immediately gone to get that treated, or at least contacted someone to help you!" Toshinori frowns as a thought occurs to him. "Was your father not with you when this happened? I can't imagine he'd let you continue on with an injury like this."

The boy blinks, averting his gaze. "He's been away for work."

Again? Every time I ask about him it seems like he's never home. How often does he even see his son?

"Did you at least text him to make him aware of your situation? This is something he should know about, Young Midoriya. You might not have told him about One for All, but I'm sure you could've come up with some excuse."

“Well…” The boy chuckles sheepishly. “It’s not like he can do anything about it when he’s halfway across the world. It’s fine.”

Toshinori can only stare at the absolute fool in front of him. But then again, he’s the one who’s teaching him, so maybe the real fool here is Toshinori himself.

He makes sure Midoriya’s attention is back on him before continuing. “I guess that's reasonable thinking. But I do need you to promise me that if you get injured again, no matter how insignificant it may seem, you’ll contact me. Trust me when I say that I don’t mind what time it is or where you are. You are my successor now, and I care for your wellbeing, my boy. If you feel like you can’t tell your father, please, tell *me.”*

The teen stays silent for a few moments, and Toshinori is once again reminded of how hard it is to tell what’s going on in the kid’s mind.

“Can you do that for me?” He prompts.

“Yes,” Midoriya says finally. He turns back and offers a mischievous smile, though Toshinori can still see some hesitance in those eyes. “But only if you let me ride on your back on the way to UA.”

Toshinori lets out a guffaw. “Are you really trying to negotiate this?”

The hero gets a cackle in reply. “I am.”

He sighs, and after taking a quick glance around to make sure no one is looking, he inflates into his larger form. “You’re acting like you broke a leg instead of an arm, Young Midoriya!”

“I will snap my ankle right now, don’t test me.”

Toshinori doesn’t doubt the validity of that statement, though it does raise his concern by that much more. The meter’s been doing that a lot these days.

And as they jump through the park and into the city, going quickly so no one can snap a picture, Toshinori can’t help but let his mind wander.

I’d care about you even if you didn’t end up becoming my successor. Though I can’t quite figure out why.

Izuku trusts All Might. He really does.

If he didn't, well, it's safe to say that the boy never would have said yes to him. He wouldn't have said yes to *any of it.* The training, the entrance exam, the quirk—none of it.

It doesn't matter what everyone else said or gave to him as advice, it's plain simple: Izuku would not have agreed to be All Might's successor had he not thought the hero to be one hundred percent trustworthy.

And All Might trusts Recovery Girl, so, by default, Izuku does too.

"She won't do anything you don't want her to," the hero reassures as he leads Izuku through the hallways of UA. "I know you're not a fan of doctors, but I must ask that you please give her a chance. She's not like the others."

Of course she isn't, Izuku thinks to himself. *She's a nurse at one of the most prestigious hero schools in Japan with one of the most important quirks to ever exist.*

In all seriousness, Izuku doesn't know why he agreed to come here. Well, it's not like he had much of a choice. It was either this or a real hospital, according to All Might. Obviously Izuku would rather go for this one.

But now he's starting to feel nervous. His good hand is starting to get shaky, and he wants nothing more than to cross his arms or do something with it to stop the obvious nerves. He also wants to run, but he stops himself on the off chance that All Might will go after him. He doesn't want to disappoint him.

It seems that the hero is having the same thoughts, as he keeps glancing at Izuku from time to time as they walk, not really out of suspicion, but probably more to reassure him.

Izuku clears his throat. "She won't take my blood, right?"

"I would think not. This is only to fix your arm." He tips his head.

“Why do you ask?”

“I just don’t like needles, that’s all.”

That’s not a lie. It’s more of a half-truth. So why does it still make Izuku feel bad?

“I don’t either, my boy. It’s an understandable fear.”

Is it, though? Izuku doesn’t care about the pain. It’s only a slight pinch, after all. He’s a lot more concerned about what’s *in* the needle, although that’s another issue entirely. Shots can be tolerated in certain settings; taking blood, for obvious reasons, cannot be.

No one can have it or else they can find out about *everything*.

“This place always amazes me,” All Might says, looking around the halls. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Didn’t you graduate from here?”

The man nods. “It’s changed quite a lot from when I attended, however. When I came here a few months ago to have my meeting with the principal, it was my first time seeing it since graduation. I must’ve spent an entire hour just walking around.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” Izuku agrees. He felt the same way when he took the entrance exam, so he kind of gets it. UA is filthy rich, so it’s only natural that it’s as grand as it is. Izuku would be a bit disappointed otherwise. But he can’t imagine what it must feel like to come back to your old school, maybe twenty or thirty years later, and see how much it’s grown. “Was it smaller back then?”

“Oh, yes!” He laughs a little. “It was still fairly large compared to other hero schools, but if I’m not mistaken it’s nearly tripled in size since I left.”

“Probably to keep up with the decrease in quirkless people in the newer generations.”

All Might gives him a sidelong glance, eyebrows furrowed a little. He’s in his small form now, having deflated right after entering the double doors. “I never thought of it like that, but that’s a good point.”

Of course it is. It’s only logical, right? Evolution and all that. All Might’s generation is bound to have more quirkless people in it,

especially since Japan's quirkless population of twenty percent is nearly all older people. Being young and without a quirk must have been a lot more common then, though.

Nowadays, not so much.

"This is it, my boy."

All Might knocks on the door even thought it's cracked open, and a voice comes from further inside the room.

"Come in, you two!"

Yep. That's definitely Recovery Girl. Izuku feels himself start to relax slightly at the fact. *No one else is going to bother you. It's just her.*

The number one hero gestures for Izuku to enter first, and so he steps through the doorway and glances around. It's a small room, but Izuku can see another entry leading to what's probably the nurse's private office.

Izuku stiffens when he hears the click of the door shutting behind him, but All Might is already leading him further in.

There's the sound of light footsteps, followed by a dull clunking. Recovery Girl hobbles out of her office with her cane and eyes the hero distastefully. "What have you done to yourself this time, All Might?"

"Chiyo, thank you for agreeing to this," All Might starts, "but I regret to say that it's not for me this time."

First name basis? They must be familiar with each other.

The old lady huffs, turning her watchful gaze onto Izuku. "Oh dear, you should've brought him here immediately, All Might. Or at least texted me in more detail." She gestures with her cane to the bed pushed to the corner of the room. "Have a seat right there, honey. I'll have to take those bandages off first."

After a reassuring push from All Might, Izuku hesitantly does as the healer says. "Thank you," the boy says, echoing the number one hero. "You didn't have to agree to this."

"Nonsense, dearie. I'm not doing much these days anyway, at least until school starts back up, that is." She hops onto a rolling stool and

slides over, peering at Izuku's limp arm. "I'm going to touch it, is that alright?"

She's asking permission to touch his injury? That's a first.

"Oh, uh, sure!" He looks back up at All Might, who's standing a little awkwardly to the side.

The hero sends him a pointed look, as if to say *see? This isn't so bad, right?*

Izuku just blinks at him, being brought out of his thinking when Recovery Girl starts to peel off the bandages. She tuts when she sees the purple skin underneath.

"My, my," she says disapprovingly, glancing at Izuku with narrowed eyes. "How long have you left it like that?"

"Uh, just overnight?"

The healer immediately swivels around in her stool to glare at All Might. "You! Didn't you tell him what would happen if he used too much of it in one go? How irresponsible can you be, boy! You're supposed to be training him!"

Izuku's jaw drops. *Oh my god, she's lecturing All Might.*

"I told her about One for All a while ago," the hero says to him, obviously misinterpreting his shock to be for something else. He shrinks back underneath the wrath of Recovery Girl's cane. "And it was a slight miscalculation on my part, Chiyo! It won't happen again!"

The lady shakes her head. "Still so reckless, hm? I thought Gran put a stop to that, but I guess not." She turns back after giving the hero another warning look and sighs. "You managed to shatter your entire arm, dearie. I can heal it, of course, but it'll take a lot of energy out of you. You'll have to rest here for a couple of hours before heading home, alright?"

Izuku, whose mind is still stuck on *am I thinking of the same Gran,* can only nod. "Yeah, that's—that's fine."

Recovery Girl throws away the bandages and clasps her hands together. "Alright. I remember you from the entrance exam, so I assume you know how my quirk works. Since this injury is of a larger

degree than your last one, you're going to feel a lot more tired than before. You can sleep here, and when you wake up you can leave after I ask a few closing questions."

Before Izuku can even open his mouth to ask *what kind of questions,* the healer is leaning forward and pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

It's just like the entrance exam, except this time the wave of exhaustion that hits him is more like a tsunami. He watches in awe as his arm glows green and then starts to reshape itself. It feels like a dull burn, kind of like how your legs feel when they fall asleep and start to prickle when you move.

His hand didn't exactly feel like this when she healed it at the entrance exam, so the side effects of her healing obviously depend on the severity or size of the injury.

"That's so cool," he whispers, and *oh.* He's falling backward.

His head hits a pillow, and then he's staring up at the too-clean ceiling. He wonders who they pay to dust up there all the time, as it looks like it was just recently cleaned. And maybe freshly painted, too. In fact, everything here looks brand new.

Or maybe Izuku is just used to poor neighborhoods and abandoned buildings. Huh. That could be a very good reason.

"That boy looks terrible, All Might, what have you been doing to him?"

"I think he's been overworking himself. I'll talk to him about it, Chiyo, I promise."

Izuku frowns to himself as the voices filter into his ears like he's underwater. His eyes shut on their own accord, and then he's being pulled into the darkness.

He is *not* looking forward to that talk.

Izuku needs to piss.

That's the first thought that comes into his mind when he wakes up. The second thought, however, is that he's alone. When he pushes himself up, he suddenly realizes just how much better he feels. He's used to pain, and so the lack of it now leaves him feeling kind of empty.

He can't tell if it's a good thing or a bad thing.

Extract tells him that there's nobody near him at this second, so he rubs the sleep out of his eyes and allows himself a small moment of vulnerability, a small moment to get back to himself. He yawns and slides off the surprisingly comfy bed. It's hard as a rock, which is just the way he likes it.

And damn, that was a good nap. That's the best nap Izuku has had in ages, though to be fair that's the *only* nap he's had in ages.

Somebody took off his shoes for him while he was asleep. There are neon pink slippers next to the bed, but he doesn't know if it's for him. It certainly wasn't there when Izuku first came in, but he still isn't sure.

Should he call All Might? Recovery Girl said he was free to leave after answering a few questions, but she's nowhere to be seen. Izuku guesses he could search for her with his quirk, but he doesn't want to invade her privacy.

And besides, what's the harm in finding her himself?

After a moment's consideration, Izuku puts on the slippers and pads quietly toward the door. There's still no one near him, so he doesn't have to be so quiet.

He sneaks out of the room—no, he corrects to himself, it's not sneaking around, he was invited here—and starts to walk around. He downloaded a map of UA right before he took the entrance exam, so he knows where everything is, but he hasn't actually gotten to *know* the place. The quick trek here with All Might didn't show him much.

Wouldn't it be impolite to start my education at a place I'm not even familiar with?

He finds a bathroom relatively quickly and ends up splashing water in his face after he's done to wake himself up more. But instead of continuing his search for Recovery Girl and All Might, he skips around and looks inside the classrooms. UA is quite a few stories tall, and there are multiple sets of stairs and elevators on each floor for public use.

As he said before: fucking *rich*.

Izuku flexes his right arm, and when he's satisfied that it's healed completely, he powers up *Boost*. He can get across the school much faster if he uses it.

He jumps at a wall and nearly slams into the concrete because of the extra force. Oh, that's right. He keeps forgetting that One for All increased the strength and durability of his other quirks as well. He has to try them out when he gets back home.

The boy proceeds to bounce between the walls like a ball in a pinball machine, occasionally sneaking glances into classrooms and closets he finds of interest.

New students are supposed to get their schedules in a week or so, meaning he doesn't know which room is going to be his. Kind of a letdown, but oh well. He can't have *too* much fun.

Izuku sees a flash of light above him and leaps upward, grabbing onto a vent hatch. He dangles in the air for a moment before popping it, letting it fall open like a trapdoor. When he swings himself inside, the boy can't help but give an appreciative whistle.

It's actually pretty wide in here, giving him a good amount of room to turn around if he needs to. It's the perfect size.

He replaces the hatch and begins his crawl around the entire school. It's chilly, but not too bad.

Izuku comes across a few janitors cleaning up the classrooms and hallways when he gets the chance to peek down. There aren't many people here other than them. The first teacher he comes across looks to be doing some preparations for his future students.

It's still a very large classroom, but compared to the ones Izuku saw just prior to this, it's more of a medium-sized room. Maybe for a support class, he reckons, since those classes tend to have fewer

students.

He feels the man's quirk and hums to himself. He knows exactly who this is.

Power Loader; Quirk: Iron Claws.

Izuku watches the hero work for a bit before moving to continue his crawl. He wonders if that'll be his homeroom teacher if the man ends up not being a teacher for the support course this year. All Might won't tell him anything about the other teachers, so Izuku is left guessing.

The man sneezes, and Izuku instinctively lets out a *bless you,* instantly freezing after he processes what he's done.

Fuck.

There's a bit of silence before a quiet *god?* comes from below.

Izuku snickers quietly to himself and hastily moves on lest the teacher decide to check the vents.

He finishes the first floor and does his pinball method again to go up to the second floor. All the while he checks the classrooms and scans for any other teachers and staff.

It's fun. Kind of like a game of some sort. He then tries to see how fast he can go through the vents without bumping into the sides too much, and the answer to that? Pretty fast. Though it probably sounds like a raccoon bumbling around to anyone else.

He slows down after a bit and taps his wristband. "Hey, AINA," he whispers.

"Yes, Izuku?" She's always quiet when she needs to be. He programmed her to be that way in case he has to go on stealth missions.

"What time is it?"

"It is currently a few minutes past four in the afternoon."

Izuku's head shoots up and hits the roof of the vent. *"Ow—shit!* It's what? How?"

"You were asleep for approximately six hours. Would you like me to call

All Might and inform him of your awakened state?"

Christ. Izuku needs to fix how she talks. Way too formal, in his opinion. They're supposed to be buddies, almost friends, not associates of a company.

"Uh, no thanks. I kinda wanna sneak around some more. Do some spy shit, y'know?"

"Of course. I am here when you need me."

Izuku rubs the bump on his head and moves forward. It's starting to get even chillier the more he goes. The air conditioners must be located at the top of UA, not the bottom like most other schools around here.

There's someone underneath him. He can feel their quirk; it's faint, but it's there. Which means they're either asleep and don't have their quirk active, or that their quirk is a mutant type and thus doesn't emit a lot of energy. But wait, it feels kind of familiar—

The vent gives way beneath him, and then Izuku is dropping like a rock. He tries to right himself in air to try and break the fall, but he doesn't have much time to do anything before he lands with an *oof* onto the classroom floor.

His head spins, as it feels like he'd hit the corner of something. Knowing his luck it was probably a desk. Wouldn't that be fantastic? He'd have to ask Recovery Girl to heal *another* injury of his.

"Fucking hell," he says to himself, glancing back up at the ceiling. There's a hole in the vents where he'd fallen, and Izuku is surprised to notice that it's actually a trapdoor with wires attached to it. Hm. So this isn't the case of faulty roofing—it was intentional.

The hatch is probably controlled via remote or signal. Which means somebody must have *activated* it.

Great. So he was being watched this entire time. The knowledge makes him feel creeped out, and also a little offended.

He shoves himself into a sitting position, only to realize that while his head had indeed hit the side of a large desk, the rest of his body actually landed on something soft.

Oh. Oh god no.

For a few terrifying seconds, Izuku is frozen in fear. Because *there was someone below him before he fell, wasn't there?*

He turns his head slowly, as if in a horror movie, and all but screeches when all he sees is a pale face surrounded by puffy yellow fabric.

Izuku scrambles back, fumbling as he tries to get away from the caterpillar thing in front of him. Soulless black eyes stare back at him, and Izuku chokes on another scream.

Holy fucking shit! Did I kill him? Or is he about to kill me? Please, I can't die like this—

"Midoriya."

Izuku's panicked thoughts come to a stuttering halt as he recognizes the voice, and thus the face attached with it. His heart is still racing, and he's still backed up against what appears to be a student's desk, but the relief that suddenly runs through him is almost nauseating.

He feels incredibly dumb now.

"Eraserhead?" He asks. You know, like an idiot. "What are you doing here?"

The blank look he gets in reply has Izuku wincing. *He works here, dumbass.* That sounds suspiciously like Kacchan's voice.

"This is my classroom. The question should be what are you doing here."

Izuku takes a moment to catch his breath and take stock of the situation. Okay. So he just fell through the vents and landed on his caterpillar-of-a-hero friend-ish thing, and now he's being questioned as to *why* he'd fallen through said vents.

"Oh, well, I just thought I'd have a look around UA, sir!" He gives a nervous chuckle, eyeing the hand that's still holding onto one end of the hero's capture weapon. How the man is able to wear that inside of the sleeping bag is a question Izuku thinks he might just be murdered for asking. "So, uh, how are you? Nice day today, isn't it?"

Eraserhead hasn't blinked once yet, as if he thinks he can just erase this entire conversation from happening. He's still lying sideways on the ground, not having moved an inch.

Before the hero can reply, though, Izuku feels a sharp spike in his mind from *Extract,* and then the doors to the classroom are bursting open, revealing a disheveled All Might in his larger form.

The number one hero is panting and practically breathing smoke, and in the next second he's suddenly right in front of Izuku. "My boy, I heard you yell! Are you hurt? What's wrong?"

Was I really that loud? Damn. And how did he get here so quickly? Did he run here?

"Uh, I'm not hurt at all. Is there something wrong?"

All Might doesn't seem to believe him, as he checks over Izuku's body quickly to make sure there are no other injuries. He wipes a dust bunny from Izuku's shirt, courtesy of the vents, and only then does he seem satisfied. He deflates with a long-suffering sigh, resting a hand on the boy's healed shoulder.

"Why are you out of bed?" He scolds lightly. "You're supposed to be resting!"

Izuku fights back a pout. "I woke up and you were gone, so I just thought I'd explore. You told me this place was beautiful, didn't you? How could you not expect me to have a look around!"

All Might pauses for a second, as if to decide if he's kidding, and then lets out another sigh. "You are something else, Young Midoriya."

I'm going to take that as a compliment.

There's the sound of a zipper being moved, and both mentor and protégé stare in confusion as Eraserhead stands up and slinks out of his sleeping bag like a newly born butterfly.

All Might coughs. "Aizawa! I didn't expect to see you here!"

The man huffs in irritation. "Again. My classroom."

"Of course, I just meant that it's—"

Izuku tunes All Might out, his brain having brought back an important point: he had *felt* Eraserhead. He'd felt his quirk even before he saw or knew he was there.

He's never been able to do that before, even as Rabbit. Does that mean he can only be sensed while he's asleep? Or when he's extremely

tired? It would make sense.

Izuku pauses and briefly wishes whatever god up above will strike him down. There are too many confusing things happening nowadays, and it's making him want to shrivel up and die.

All Might nudges him, and Izuku realizes Eraserhead is speaking to him now.

"Didn't think you'd actually end up trying out for the exam, Midoriya."

Why is he looking at me like that? I mean, sure, I did just fall on him, but that's not my fault. Or maybe he always looks like this when he's at work.

"Yeah, I didn't either until last minute!" Izuku dips his head quickly. "Again, thank you for the application, Eraserhead!"

The man just grunts. "I remember telling you to call me by my name when I'm off-duty, kid." He studies Izuku with narrowed eyes. "Also. Just because you set the new record for this school doesn't mean you can slack off. I expect a lot from you when you get here."

A lecture? Already? With the way this conversation is going, Izuku hopes he doesn't get him as a teacher. It wouldn't end well for him.

Eraserhead—no, *Aizawa,* sets his sleeping bag on his desk and raises a dark brow at All Might. "You two seem close." He skillfully ignores the blond hero's squawk. "You told me you only knew each other in passing, All Might."

"Ah, we do! This is just one of those times, you see!"

Izuku suppresses an eye-roll. The man is fumbling with his words. He obviously doesn't know how to lie, at least, not to Aizawa. Izuku decides to help out, as it is their shared secret now. "I broke my arm and he took me to see Recovery Girl, sir. She healed it a few hours ago!"

He holds up the appendage in question, as if to further prove his point.

"You broke your arm?" Aizawa repeats, and is it just Izuku, or does he sound *suspicious?*

Why is he acting like this? Izuku has done no wrong, *ever.* It's not like

he was caught stealing government files the first time they met, so why is he so suspicious of him?

...Or maybe he's just suspicious of All Might. It seems like the two have a strained relationship at best.

"Yeah," Izuku continues. "I broke it while doing, ah, teenager things."

And okay, even All Might cringes visibly after hearing that.

Great, now who's shit at lying?

"Teenager things."

Izuku shrugs. "Yes."

"Well," Aizawa says dryly, "try not to make a habit of doing that. The old lady has other things to do than take care of careless injuries, understand?"

Asshole. *Annoying* asshole. But still a nice person and an amazing hero. Which makes him even *more* annoying. It reminds Izuku of Kacchan, minus the explosions and obvious temper, of course.

"Of course, sir! I'll be more careful from now on!"

That seems to be the answer he's looking for, as Aizawa turns away, not even sparing All Might another glance.

"Good. Now will the both of you please get out? I need to finish my nap before I start planning."

Izuku can only wish for another nap of his own, knowing he probably won't be able to sleep like that again for a very long time.

It's when they're almost back to the entrance of UA when All Might speaks for the first time after leaving Recovery Girl's office. "Aizawa is

certainly a character, isn't he?"

Izuku hums in agreement, currently skipping alongside him from leftover nerves. "Kind of scary, too."

The blond shivers. "Indeed. Also, I have a question for you, Young Midoriya."

Oh no. Not another question.

The only things Recovery Girl wanted to ask was his full name, phone number, and his father's full name and contact information. It's apparently to start his medical file since his old one is outdated. He hasn't gone to see any doctors since he was a child. He has *most* of his required vaccines and shots, however, but that was all through a private company his father had hired. How that was even legal is beyond Izuku.

"Yes?" He says, hoping the question is nothing bad.

"What is that on your finger, my boy?"

And oh! Now that's something he can answer. It's a good distraction from everything that's happened so far.

"It's a ring I made last night!" Izuku explains, holding up his left hand. There, sitting on his middle finger, is a shiny metal band. "I had a few extra parts lying around, so I decided to make the most of it."

"It looks very nice," All Might praises, obviously noting the engraved bunny running around the edge.

"It's a quirk suppressor! I thought it would help with One for All's control since I broke an entire arm just by using it."

All Might chokes, stopping in his tracks to stare at him. "It's a what? You *made* that?"

Izuku frowns. "Well, yeah. I figured it would take a while to get control of the new quirk, so I sorta stayed up a bit to make this ring here. It was a lot of trial and error, but I'm ultimately happy with how it came out!" He bounces on the balls of his feet, not able to contain his excitement. "The rabbit glows in the dark, too!"

That last part was a pain to do, but not as painful as it was to try and make the suppressor only work on *Extract* and One for All.

Once he has the ring on, it acts as a duller of sorts. It only works on his strongest quirks, those being *Extract,* One for All, and *Force.*

Force was a surprise, though a welcome one at that. It's not like he ever uses that one. He never *wants* to use it.

"That's amazing," All Might says, breaking off into a frown, "though you really need to take better care of yourself, young man. You look dead on your feet most days, but today you look even worse."

Izuku wrinkles his nose. "It was only one night! I usually sleep more than that, I promise."

I promise? Where did that come from?

"Hm." The hero stops and faces him directly, looking much more serious. "Listen, Young Midoriya, I am here to help you the best that I can. I don't have much experience when it comes to training others, but I'll do my best."

Izuku doesn't know how to respond to the sudden kindness and topic change, so he stays quiet.

"I'm going to help you train One for All so we can get through this together, my boy! Right?"

Together? Izuku looks up at the man and sees something brighter in his gaze. There's a mixture of kindness and honesty in there that Izuku doesn't quite know how to deal with, and he's not even certain if he deserves it.

"Right," he says, and maybe this time he kind of believes it.

The boy has a feeling the few weeks until school starts will go by much quicker than expected.

Chapter End Notes

n

fragmented

Chapter Notes

THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF ACT II

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forgetting things can be easy.

It's easy to forget your nonexistent car keys. It's easy to forget to water your fake plants. It's easy to forget where you put your phone.

It's easy to forget where you are. It's easy to forget that you're not in danger. It's easy to forget that you're safe.

Especially when you're running through the city, dodging almost a dozen police officers as they chase after you.

Okay, that's probably the only thing Izuku isn't forgetting anytime soon.

Holy shit, Izuku thinks, *I'm gonna be late.*

The first day of school and he's already off to a bad start. Just fantastic, huh? In his defense, the morning started out great. He didn't sleep at all last night in favor of testing out his quirks for the umpteenth time, and his right hand is still shaking from all the writing he'd done in his notebook, but that's okay! If anything, he's even *more* motivated now.

He was ready to go with a coffee in hand and a few fresh notebooks he'd gotten at a dollar store, excited to kick off the school year. Which is really telling since excitement isn't an emotion he feels often unless pizza or quirks are involved. Damn, he really needs to eat at Tony's again for some Friday Night Free Breadsticks.

Another good thing that's happened is that Kacchan gave him a nice backpack from his parents' work to use for school supplies. Izuku always forgets that Mitsuki and Masaru work at a fashion company, so he was surprised when Kacchan threw the bright pink backpack at him.

So, yes, to put it short, he was having a good day. He would've arrived at UA twenty minutes earlier than needed had things worked out;

enough time to prepare for the day ahead and calm down his jitters so he wouldn't scare anyone.

But then he ended up stopping a guy from robbing this homeless man on the side of the street, which prompted an entire crowd of people to watch as Izuku smashed the criminal's face into a nearby fire hydrant, breaking his nose.

And okay, *that* was a complete accident. Izuku was aiming to shove his face into the sidewalk, but the panic rising inside him instead made him miscalculate by just a couple inches. To be fair, though, Izuku was in a rush, as he did *not* want to get caught doing this today of all days, nosiree.

Tsukauchi is on duty at the moment. Izuku doesn't want to face the detective's wrath, especially since it's one of his busiest work days. The boy would be skinned alive, probably.

But despite his wishful thinking, things just don't go his way.

A police officer, one who obviously isn't familiar with Izuku or his antics, had been in the crowd when it happened. He ran forward, attempting to pry Izuku off of the robber, and had promptly handcuffed the boy when Izuku stood up. Which is kind of a betrayal, seeing as the boy was listening to him and not resisting, but whatever.

Izuku was okay with it at first, figuring that the cuffs would come off once he proved his obedience, but then the officer just had to say: *"I'm taking you in for assault, son."*

Yeah. Fuck that.

Cue Izuku running through the city, hands still cuffed behind his back, trying to frantically lose the people tailing him among the throngs of workers. It's a busy morning with kids and adults alike going to school and work, so it's pretty crowded on the sidewalks.

"Hey, somebody stop that kid!"

It's almost laughable how not a single person listens to the cop's shout. Izuku zig-zags through the people, trying not to be rude and shove them like he normally does, and eyes a nice pole at the corner of a crosswalk up ahead. It seems to be broken from an accident or villain fight, as the top part of it is missing, leaving behind rough, jagged edges.

Edges that are sharp enough for Izuku to use.

He speeds up, a maniacal grin falling onto his face. There's a car parked on the curb a few yards away, which is just *perfect.* He steps onto a bench and leaps toward the car, using the hood as leverage to tuck his feet into his chest as he rolls over it. He slips his bound hands under his legs and to the front of his body, putting the cuffs in perfect position.

Izuku hits the ground running, now slightly more balanced with his arms in front of him. He yells at people to move out of his way as he nears the pole, and, with *Boost* providing extra force, brings both of his wrists down onto the jagged edges. The chain connecting the handcuffs together snaps, releasing Izuku from the restraints.

The cuffs still hang on both wrists and bite into his skin, but Izuku can worry about that later.

He chances a glance behind him to see that some of the cops have caught up, their faces flushed red from the chase. Izuku just laughs and throws them the middle fingers, channeling some extra strength into his legs to go faster.

He *could* use One for All, as that would be much quicker, though that would probably be obvious to the feds chasing him. He'd definitely have another case of public quirk usage on his file if someone saw the red sparks coming off of him. Which, by the way, is fucking *wack.* All Might told him so. Apparently not many other users have had that happen to them.

It's probably because I'm so small. Curse this fucking planet.

Even with a suppressor on, he's always going to emit a little too much power, thus the lightning. Kind of like a circuitboard, in a way. If the input is too much, it'll end up sparking.

"See ya, ladies!" Izuku shouts, blowing them a kiss as he veers off the side of the street and heads toward UA. It took him a good ten minutes to shake most of them off, so now he has to *run for it* since he doesn't want to be late.

He can't be late. Kacchan would kill him. Hell, All Might would probably give him that disappointed frown of his without saying anything if he found out, which never fails to make Izuku guilty.

Fuck. He promised he'd be on time. He was *supposed* to be on time.

Izuku runs up the large hill and pushes through the gates, relieved at the fact that he didn't forget his school ID. The entrance doors have been left open, and Izuku shoots through them and heads down the hallway.

Students received their schedules a week ago, but he never looked at his. The only thing he knows is that he shares the same class as Kacchan, thankfully. What's it called? Class 1-A?

He's panting and frantically trying to put on his tie correctly, as it'd come undone while he was running. He doesn't know where he's going. He remembers Kacchan saying something about the fourth floor, so he's gonna have to *search* for his class. Great.

Elevators are too slow. He decides *fuck it* and uses One for All to take the stairs five at a time. Thanks to the couple weeks of training with All Might, he's gotten used to the increase of power in his body.

It seems One for All and *Boost* overlap each other. If he uses them together he can use twice as much power while minimizing the damage to his limbs. They can be stacked on top of each other seeing as they're both enhancement quirks. It's exhausting to use them both at the same time, but if done correctly he should be just as fine as before, if not better. Patrol has been even *more* fun than he previously imagined it would be.

Yep. Izuku is definitely late. He hasn't seen a single student or teacher milling about. The boy rushes out of the stairwell and skids to a halt after zooming halfway through the hall. A large door, one that could probably fit a giant through it, is standing before him. The words *1-A* hang on a sign right above him, confirming his suspicions.

There's not one sound behind that door. This is going to be hella awkward.

Izuku tries to smooth out his hair and clothes, aware that his tie looks like a goddamn *toddler* did it, and carefully pushes open the large door, heart in his throat.

Should I have knocked? Oh fuck, too late now.

When he sees the teacher standing at the podium in front of the whole class, book in hand, Izuku wants to scream. Because *of fucking course* it's him. The world hates Izuku. It just wants to watch him burn, huh?

"Midoriya," Aizawa says tiredly, not looking up from his book, "you're

four minutes late on the first day of class."

Izuku steps inside and bows his head low, flushing red when he feels the eyes of all the other students on him. "I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"See to it that it doesn't." The man gestures vaguely with a hand. "I trust you won't have a problem finding your seat."

Nope. Izuku will not have a problem, seeing as his is obviously the only one unoccupied. "No, sir! Sorry."

He shuffles past the man, grip tightening on the straps of his hot pink backpack. Okay, so maybe this isn't a very good idea. The students closest to him are eyeing the handcuffs on his wrists and gawking, but he forces himself to ignore them.

Yep. He remembers why he hates school now.

Kacchan is sat right in front of Izuku's seat and snickers as his friend passes him with a glare.

"Now that everyone is here," Aizawa drawls, causing Izuku to wince, "we can continue." He reaches under his desk and pulls out a large box of clothing. "Change into your gym clothes and head out to the testing grounds. Make it quick."

With that, their new homeroom teacher snags a clipboard off his desk and walks right out of the classroom. Huh. This is interesting. Aren't they supposed to have orientation today?

The moment the door clicks shut, the students all rush toward the bin to get their own set of clothes and head to the locker rooms. It's only then that Izuku realizes he recognizes most of the students here. He saw them during the entrance exam, either in the auditorium or in his own battle center.

"Kacchan," Izuku whispers, sticking close to his friend's side as the blond practically scares everyone away from them. "What did I miss?"

"Hah? Nothing, shitty nerd. The hobo ninja just fucking slid in here and told us all his name. The extras here are more annoying than in middle school."

"Once again," a familiar boy with dark blue hair and glasses says, chopping the air as they make their way to the lockers. "It is rude to

call people extras! I must insist that you—"

"Shove a stick up your ass, you fucking prick!" Kacchan cuts off. "I don't have time for you losers."

Oh boy. People are staring now.

Izuku gives a sheepish smile and pinches his friend. "Sorry about him," he apologizes. "He gets a little angry sometimes."

The blue haired boy's demeanor changes instantly upon seeing him. "Ah, you're from the entrance exam! I'm afraid we got off to the wrong start, so let me introduce myself properly. I am Iida Tenya."

Iida. The name is like a slap to the face. Now Izuku *knows* where he recognizes the boy's quirk from. The engines give it away.

"You're Ingenium's brother," he says, nerves evaporating all at once. "It's nice to meet you! Well, properly, like you said. I'm Midoriya Izuku."

Iida nods kindly as they enter the boys' locker room together, Kacchan having already stomped off. "Midoriya. You perceived the true nature of that practical exam, didn't you? That's why you saved that girl."

Izuku frowns. "Um, I mean, partially?"

It's an exam for the hero course. Of course they'd score you on rescue points. Isn't that the whole point of being a hero? To save people?

"You're a lot more skilled than I previously assumed. Forgive me for being so rude to you. I misjudged you! I hate to admit it, but you were the superior candidate." Iida bows his head in an apology, and Izuku stands there awkwardly for a moment before seeming to jolt back into action, frantically waving him off.

"Ah, it's fine, really! You weren't rude." That's a fat lie, one that Iida doesn't seem to buy either, but the boy just nods and apologizes again after saying a brief farewell.

Izuku looks around for his friend now that he's alone, and he spots him almost immediately. "Kacchan," he hisses. "Help me take these off."

He holds out his hands, cuffs clearly visible, but Kacchan just cackles. "Why should I?"

“Kacchan, I am not in the mood for this. I have to get these off, or else I’m gonna get—”

“Woah, dude, are those handcuffs?”

Please, somebody hit Izuku with a bus. When he dies he wants his body to be hurled through All for One’s window at seventy miles per hour with the Unravel OST playing in the background. He wants his death to be weaponized.

Izuku turns to see a boy with spiky red hair staring at him. “Er, no?”

“That’s pretty manly, bro! Are they real?” Spiky Dude is half naked as he pulls on his gym clothes, and Izuku briefly wonders how one can hold a full conversation with a stranger while changing. It’s then that he notices a cut on one of his eyebrows, making him guess as to what the boy’s quirk is.

The question captures the attention of all the other boys in the locker room, and some of them crowd around Izuku, asking him varying questions. It seems they all heard about what happened during the entrance exam and want to ask him about it. Which, admittedly, is not fun for someone who’s as anxious and paranoid as Izuku.

“Back the fuck off!” Kacchan hisses, glaring daggers at them. “You guys are a waste of our time!”

Great. Now they’re gonna think we’re stuck up. Fantastic.

Izuku quickly pulls on his gym clothes during the commotion and slips past the other boys, heading outside. The sunlight makes him cringe, which is why he tries not to patrol during the day. He’s not meant to be in the sun. Wait, does that make him a vampire?

For a few moments, Izuku thinks he might be lost, but then he spots a tall figure waiting in one of the fields, and he walks a little quicker to wait beside him. He’s the first one out, apparently, which is surprising. The rest of the students are probably still chatting with each other in the lockers.

“Midoriya.”

Izuku jerks out of his thoughts to see that Aizawa is staring at him now. “Yes, sensei?”

The honorific slips out casually, but Aizawa doesn’t seem to care. Why

would he, now that that's his title? "Do I want to ask why you have those on your wrist?"

Izuku's face is on fire now, he's sure of it. "I, uh, don't think so, sir. It's a rather long story."

"Hm. Good thing we don't have the time." He turns away and glances back at his clipboard. "Everyone else should be arriving soon. I expect those off by tomorrow."

After another minute passes, the rest of the class trails out, a fact that Aizawa is quick to call them out on.

"That took too long. You should all be quicker while changing. UA only has three years to make you into fine heroes, so there's no time to waste with chatting and making friends. Today we're going to do a quirk apprehension test."

Immediately, the students all begin to clamor.

"What about orientation?" A very *familiar* brunette says, looking appalled. "Or our guidance sessions?"

Aizawa merely blinks. "As I said, there's no time to waste on stuff like that if you want to become heroes. UA is known for its freestyle educational system. That applies to us teachers as well."

In layman's terms, it means he can do whatever the hell he wants and no one can stop him.

Kacchan whispers something that sounds suspiciously like *I like this bastard,* and Izuku hides a laugh behind a palm.

"Midoriya," Aizawa says, making Izuku fall silent instantly. "You got first in the entrance exam. Step into that circle right there."

Oh god. This kind of feels like an execution. Izuku doesn't like being the center of attention, and yet he once again has eyes all over him.

Aizawa starts naming a bunch of exercises and physical testing procedures that Izuku can't bring himself to pay attention to. He's too busy trying not to look too awkward but also not too comfortable at the eyes all over him.

"You did all these in middle school, yes?" The teacher asks, pointedly addressing the rest of the students and not Izuku. "Your standard no-

quirks-allowed gym tests. This country unfortunately still insists on prohibiting quirks when calculating the averages of those records. It's not rational."

Izuku kind of understands what he means. The department of education is just procrastinating. Wouldn't it be better in the long run to get students used to their quirks, or lack thereof, right after getting them?

"Midoriya. How far can you throw without using your quirk?"

"Oh, uh, sixty-five meters, sensei."

Kacchan can throw sixty-seven meters, the petulant part of his brain says, and Izuku pushes that thought away. No use getting upset over it.

"Great," Aizawa says, tossing a ball in the air. "Now try it with your quirk. Do whatever you need to. Just don't leave the circle."

And it's only *now* that Izuku freezes. Oh. He's actually the dumbest person alive. He is the fucking dirt that people walk on. Holy shit.

I haven't told Kacchan about One for All yet.

He meant to. He truly did. Right after his talk with Ms. Hanako and Eraserhead, Izuku planned on finding a good time to sit down and tell his friend about everything that's happened.

Kacchan already knows about his meetings with All Might, of course, and technically he *did* vote yes for Izuku to accept the quirk, despite not knowing what he was even saying yes to, but he *doesn't* know that Izuku has One for All. Actually, does he even know that such a quirk *exists?* Has Izuku ever told him about that piece of information or no? He can't remember right now.

Izuku's hands get shaky, and his nerves come back to him instantly and cause him to sweat despite it not being too hot out. He grits his teeth, still frozen, and the ball Aizawa threw a moment prior hits him in the chest and bounces to the ground.

Alright. That's embarrassing.

A few snickers come from the crowd of students watching, mostly from Kacchan himself, and Izuku scrambles to pick it up. Whatever. He can deal with the repercussions of this later. All he knows is that

he *has* to at least try his best.

He's not stupid. He can feel All Might watching from the corner of a nearby building; *Extract* can always recognize One for All.

Izuku doesn't take off his ring. Doesn't need to.

"That looks to be about 15%, my boy!" All Might says during one of their training sessions, having just watched Izuku use One for All with his suppressor on.

"Yeah," Izuku mumbles, voice tight. "That's all I can use without hurting myself, though. It's not enough."

"That's still pretty good, all things considered! Your previous enhancements must have done some good to your body after all."

Izuku darkly thinks that it's not just because of Boost, but he agrees nonetheless.

He rolls the ball between his fingertips and tries to think quickly. He can regulate One for All like how All Might told him to. Even with his suppressor it's a bit too strong, so if he just imagines himself reining it back in, kind of like an egg in a microwave, trying not to explode, then he can use it without any physical consequences.

Or he can just use *Boost* and get a score in the late 100's, which is still fairly good. But he knows that All Might is watching, and he'd probably question Izuku later as to why he didn't see the telltale red lightning associated with him using One for All.

Does he want me to use it? Would he even care? Why else would he be watching?

Damnit. He's taking too long. Well. Here goes nothing.

Izuku rears back his arm and pivots on his heel, that familiar burn racing up his arm as he sends the ball soaring with a short burst of wind. Sparks dance across his upper body, but only for a moment. The throw wasn't that strong, all things considering. Not *nearly* as strong as it could've been had he actually been willing to injure himself in front of Aizawa, so Izuku is nothing short of shocked when he turns around to see the score on the device held in the teacher's hand.

574.1 meters.

“It’s important for us to know our limits,” Aizawa says, looking pleasantly surprised. “That’s the first rational step to figuring out what kind of heroes you’ll be.”

There’s the sound of cackling, and Izuku pales, wincing as he turns around to meet Kacchan’s eyes. The blond’s expression is unreadable, but Izuku has a feeling he knows what’s happening even before Kacchan starts forward.

“What the *hell?”* The blond is suddenly stalking toward him, voice low. “The fuck was that, Deku?”

Does he think this is one of my previous quirks?

Izuku holds his hands up to ease Kacchan’s growing anger and confusion, preparing for more sharp words, but then there’s a flash of gray and Kacchan is being restrained by Aizawa’s capture weapon, halting him just a few feet away from Izuku.

Kacchan hisses like a raccoon with rabies, twisting to glare at the man. “Damn *scarf*. Let me go!”

He’s not surprised in the slightest by the capture weapon, probably since Izuku’s rambled about it to him before.

“No,” Aizawa deadpans, done with life. “Stop using your quirk already. I have dry-eye.”

Kacchan obeys after only a few more moments of struggling, and the tendrils fall away from him and return to Aizawa’s shoulders. Something like hurt flashes across his face as he glances back at Izuku, and then he’s storming away, back towards the group of now silent students. “You’re explaining this later, shitty nerd.”

Izuku laughs nervously, shaking slightly now. He’d expected a response like this, but he was hoping it wouldn’t happen in public. He can only pray he hasn’t hurt the other by keeping him out of the loop.

His friend knows about most of his quirks and what they do, and so it must be confusing to see what looks to be *another* one popping up out of nowhere. And for Izuku to use it in public? That must be surprising as well.

Aizawa sighs. “What a waste of time. The demonstration is over now.”

This prompts the rest of the class to start talking over each other

again, most of them in awe over Izuku's score.

"Almost 600 meters? Seriously?"

"Woah, this is awesome!"

"We can use our quirks for real! The hero course is great!"

Izuku winces. He knows that these comments are a mistake as soon as he hears them. He's known Aizawa long enough to be able to figure out what's coming.

"Awesome?" Aizawa repeats dryly. "You're hoping to become heroes after just three years here, and you thinks it'll be all fun and games?" His expression darkens. "Right. The one with the lowest score across all eight events will be judged hopeless and be expelled."

The amount of shocked cries and yelling *this* sparks is even higher than before, but Aizawa ignores it easily.

"Your fates are in our hands," he says sarcastically. "Welcome, this is the hero course at UA High!"

The same brunette that Izuku *still* hasn't thanked for making sure he didn't turn into a pancake twice over on the day of the entrance exam, speaks up again. "Sir, it's only the first day! I mean, even if it wasn't, that's totally unfair."

"The world is full of unfair things. Heroes are the ones who correct all that unfairness. That's Plus Ultra, right? Use your strengths to overcome this challenge, as they'll be plenty more coming your way." He bends a finger teasingly, sporting a wry grin. "So bring it."

The first event is the 50-meter dash, which is easy enough. Iida beats everyone with a time of 3.04 seconds, which isn't surprising considering the fact that he has engines for legs. Izuku still can't believe he didn't recognize him during the entrance exam. He *loves* Ingenium, so he's a bit disappointed that he didn't recognize the hero's brother.

A girl with an obvious frog-related quirk bounces forward to get a pretty decent score. The brunette uses her quirk—zero gravity, Izuku learns—to lighten her clothes and shoes to help herself go faster. The boy with a frankly amazing fashion taste uses his naval laser to get him across the distance in short bursts. It's still a bit slow, but it works.

God, Izuku really wants his analysis notebook right now.

And then it's Kacchan and Izuku's turn. Both boys are extremely competitive against each other, but the current situation seems to make Kacchan even more eager to beat him. Izuku hasn't really had the time to practice running with One for All, as it's harder to control in his legs, so he sticks to using *Boost* this time.

In the end, Kacchan gets 4.13 while Izuku gets 4.26 seconds—which only adds fuel to his friend's rising anger. Kacchan has a sharp grin on his face at the small victory, and Izuku just glares right back.

The second event is grip strength. Izuku does great on that, as he can do that well enough on any given day even without his enhancements. The only reason he didn't get first in that is because his arm still hurts like *hell* from the ball throw, and also because the octopus guy ended up getting 540 kilograms.

The standing long jump is next. Izuku obviously doesn't get as far as Kacchan since the blond can literally *fly* using his explosions, but he likes to think he does okay.

Boost is really coming in clutch. It seems One for All will only be used for certain situations at the moment, at least until he can get a little better control over it.

Side-stepping is a little more difficult. Izuku can go incredibly fast, but not for too long. It's easy to lose his balance. A weird, perverted grape student does well on that only because he uses the balls on his head to bounce himself back and forth.

Smart, Izuku thinks, but still dumb, if that even makes sense.

The ball throw is next, and Izuku is forced to watch as Kacchan gets an amazing score of 705.2 meters, which is definitely higher than Izuku's own score. The students marvel over him, and Izuku can't help but do the same thing.

The guy with spiky red hair laughs from beside Izuku. "Die?" He says, echoing Kacchan.

Everyone else seems a bit confused, too.

The brunette, however, gets an infinity. Izuku had suspected at such, given that she can literally send things up into space if she wants to. And she did, actually.

Terrifyingly beautiful.

The seated toe touch feels more like a warmup to Izuku and Kacchan, in all honesty. Both boys are very flexible, as they do stretching exercises almost every other day. Iida is surprisingly flexible as well despite his stocky build.

Even more beautiful.

Upper body training consists of simple pull ups, and when both Izuku and Kacchan are asked to do it on the same pole, it's only logical that it turns into yet another competition. Izuku keeps going until Kacchan slips from the raised pole due to sweat, and only then does Izuku drop to the floor, panting.

He's ignoring me. Fuck.

The octopus guy finished third in that one, and next up was endurance running. Izuku has quite a bit of stamina thanks to being a vigilante and also training almost every day of the week, so he's one of the last up.

After what feels like forever, the tests seem to be concluded and the scores ready to be shown.

"Move along," Aizawa commands. "Time for the results." He clicks a button on the same device in his hand, resulting in a holographic screen popping up and displaying the rankings. "Also. I was lying about expelling someone. That was a logical ruse meant to bring out the best in all of you."

Everyone promptly screams and groans. Izuku, after realizing that he should probably be acting dismayed as well, joins in for just a second.

See, Izuku is used to Aizawa's logical ruses, as he's been subjected to them plenty of times as Rabbit. But this deception, however, is a little concerning.

"Well, of course it was a lie." A tall, black-haired girl with a high ponytail says. "Didn't take much to figure that out."

In a way, she's kind of right. It's hard to believe that anyone would follow through with a threat like that. But Izuku also knows that Aizawa has expelled an entire class of first years before. He knows this because the man had straight up told him. So Izuku knows the threat wasn't really a lie; it was more of a motivational factor if anything,

and if he felt inclined to at any time, Izuku knows Aizawa wouldn't have hesitated to do good on the promise in the end.

It turns out that Izuku got fourth place while Kacchan, of course, got third. He always seems to be one step ahead of his friend.

It was expected really. Izuku probably could've used more power if he wanted to, but he would've injured himself and, knowing Aizawa, would've gotten lectured and probably expelled for it.

Eraserhead has scolded him plenty of times about how recklessness doesn't equate for much in the face of a dangerous situation. It may help in certain instances where quick thinking is needed, but overall it will get somebody killed.

"Oftentimes," Eraserhead says pointedly. "Yourself."

When Kacchan grips his shoulder and steers him out of UA after they changed back into their uniforms, Izuku is starting to think that that option isn't so bad.

Great. Now he's gotta avoid getting murdered by his best friend.

Kacchan is eerily silent now. Izuku told him they couldn't talk about it here, so at least the blond has the sense not to go demanding answers anymore. He's gonna snap again, though, Izuku just knows it, so he might as well prepare for the best in a secluded area.

The two boys are almost out of the gates when Iida comes running up to them. "Midoriya, how are you!"

I just saw him, Izuku thinks, confused. *Why is he asking me that?*

"Oh, I'm fine, Iida, thank you!"

"Aizawa-sensei sure fooled us. He made me think that this is how it is at the top when he threatened us with expulsion, but then he deceived us—our own instructor!"

Izuku listens to him talk with fondness. The green-haired boy had admittedly thought Iida to be a bit pompous at first, but now it seems he's just super serious. Incredibly intelligent, too.

A good hero in the making.

"Hey, you two!"

Kacchan grumbles something about another fucking annoyance, but Izuku pays him no mind once he recognizes who's bouncing up to them.

She's still really pretty.

"Ah, the infinity girl," Iida greets.

"I'm Uraraka Ochaco!" She says excitedly. "Um, youre Iida Tenya and Midoriya, ah, Deku, right?"

Izuku jolts at theguess. "Deku? That's not my—"

"Oi," Kacchan interrupts harshly, hands stuffed inside his pockets. "Only I can call the shitty nerd that, got it?"

Izuku elbows him. "It's fine, Kacchan." He presents what's hopefully a polite smile at the girl. "Ah, actually my real name is Izuku. Kacchan just calls me that to tease me."

"A derogatory pet name, then?" Iida says, brows furrowed.

Alright, Izuku wouldn't go *that* far. A pet name?

"Oh, sorry! I just thought Deku meant to do your best, you know? Like *you can do it!"* Uraraka pumps a fist into the air. "I think it sounds nice! Like *dekiru!"*

Izuku's eyes bulge, and it's almost embarrassing how fast he replies: "That's fine!"

"Hah?"

"Midoriya, show a bit of backbone!" Iida starts chopping the air again. "It's an insult, isn't it? It's like the Copernican Revolution!"

The fucking *what?* No wonder Izuku didn't ace the history part of the written exam.

Uraraka seems to be in the same boat. "Coperni-who?"

While Iida starts to rant about the revolution and its similarities to Izuku's predicament, the green-haired boy can't help but feel kind of giddy and confused at the same time.

Did I... just make two new friends?

“What was that, Deku?” Uraraka asks brightly, turning to him with flushed cheeks.

Izuku coughs, not meaning to have said that aloud. “N-Nothing! Just mumbling!”

Uraraka nods. “By the way, I never thanked you for saving me! I would’ve been crushed by the zero-pointer if you didn’t take it down when you did!” She laughs a little, but before Izuku can even reply, to thank her for a similar reason, she’s already continuing her conversation with Iida.

I made friends?

If the knowing look Kacchan throws his way says anything, Izuku definitely did.

The boy doesn’t know if he regrets it or not.

Shouta is tired. Way too tired for this. He does quirk apprehension tests every year instead of taking his class to orientation, and he still hasn’t seen anything wonderful happen. He expected a bit more from this group of students, if he’s being honest.

“Aizawa, you liar!”

The underground hero just sighs, having heard and *seen* his new workmate hiding behind the corner of the wall. He wouldn’t be surprised if some of the other students saw him as well. “All Might,” he greets flatly, not caring to remember his last name. “So you were watching. Good to know you don’t mind wasting time.”

“A logical ruse?” The blond echoes, hands on his hips. “April Fool’s Day passed a while ago.”

“I’m aware.”

All Might continues after a brief, contemplative pause. “That boy. You

sense his potential as well, yes?"

Shouta doesn't have to ask who he's referring to. "As well?"

"Will you be supporting him? I understand that's not usually your style, but it seems that you've taken quite a liking to him."

Troublesome. All Might isn't completely idiotic, otherwise he wouldn't have gotten to the ranking he's at, but Shouta can't help but think he's a little dense. He doesn't know when to mind his business.

"He doesn't have zero potential," Shouta grants. He's stopped walking now, tilting his face to stare tiredly up at the much taller hero. "That's all I can say."

Midoriya seems to be the one with the most potential out of them all. His actions during the entrance exam proved that.

It is true, however, that if one of the students had shown no prospects, Shouta would have cut them loose. His threat of expulsion wasn't a lie, not at the time.

There's nothing crueler than letting someone chase their half-baked dreams. Shouta wouldn't do that to someone.

The problem with Midoriya, however, is that there's a lot of things Shouta doesn't know. Or at least understand. He doesn't truly get some of the information he's been exposed to.

He's had a few personal interactions with the boy, and so he pretty much thought he knew what his quirk was: basic enhancements. Pretty simple and common, yet powerful if utilized in the correct way. But now, after seeing the display of raw power Midoriya showed during the ball throw, Shouta isn't quite certain anymore.

That doesn't seem like *basic* enhancements. That seems like *All Might* level enhancements.

Actually. Now that he's thinking about it.

"Why such an interest in the kid? Is it because he knows about your time limit?"

"Ah, sorry?"

Shouta rolls his eyes as the hero hacks up a lung. "Less than three weeks ago, All Might, you powered down in front of him when you

brought him here to heal his arm. I was there." He tips his head. "The kid obviously knew beforehand. How?"

Why is what he really means. Why does a seemingly random kid know about the number one hero's secret? And why does said hero favor him so openly when he's supposedly only come in contact with him a few times?

"Well, er, I'm sure you remember the sludge villain I took down a little while back?"

Shouta nods once, already impatient. "The one that gave Tsukauchi a week's worth of paperwork, yes. What are you getting at?"

"You see, Young Bakugou wasn't the only one who was attacked." The hero suddenly turns solemn. "Midoriya was actually the first victim. I was already nearing my limit when I came across the villain suffocating him, and I saved him as quickly as I could."

And that's... a little surprising. Shouta heard about there being another victim before the explosive teen, but he didn't know it was Midoriya.

"And you accidentally powered down in front of him?" Shouta finishes for him. He doesn't wait for a reply. "While that explains why he knows your secret, that doesn't explain why he's your favorite student after having only a few points of contact with him. Isn't that what you told me?"

The tall blond sputters, waving his hands in front of him at the thinly hidden accusation. "I do not have favorites! It is unbecoming of a new teacher to have—"

And that's my cue to leave.

Shouta just walks past him, already tuning him out. It doesn't seem like he's going to get much more information from the man, so why bother? It's not like he particularly cares. He could always research things himself if he felt like it.

Which he doesn't. What he does feel like doing, however, is heading for the vending machine in the teacher's lounge. There's a cold can of coffee in there with his name on it.

He has a feeling he's going to need quite a lot of caffeine in the upcoming weeks to withstand this new group of hellions. They have

potential; he wasn't lying. He might only have to expel one of them after all, and that's only because of their perverted tendencies.

Yeah. He didn't miss that particular brat's wandering eyes and hands. He'll give him another day or so to judge his character, and then he'll decide whether or not he's worth keeping.

But besides that, Shouta is willing to admit that maybe this new wave of heroes-in-training won't be so bad.

And that kind of scares him.

"Isn't it great hanging out?" Kacchan's voice drips with sarcasm. "Just the four of us: you, me, and the wall of lies you've built between us."

Izuku frowns. "Wait, who's the fourth one?"

"Really. That's what you fucking got out of that? It's *Missy."*

"Oh, yeah!" Izuku picks up said cat, who's been busy rubbing her face all over his pant legs, and places her on the table. "Isn't she a cutie, today?"

A paper book is thrown at his head, and Izuku dodges it at the same that Missy lets out a hiss. The boy glares at Kacchan, teeth bared.

"Hey, you could've hit her!"

Kacchan doesn't seem to care, though. "That's what I said yes to that day, isn't it?"

"What are you—?"

"When you asked me that stupid question while we were working out." His red eyes narrow. "Yes or no, right? You didn't give me any context, but you were asking if you should accept that damn quirk, huh?"

Oh. Hit the nail right on the head.

“Mayhaps.”

“I swear to fucking *god,”* Kacchan says, holding up another book threateningly. “I’m going to kill you.”

Izuku hums to himself as Missy places herself in his lap. “Please do not. We’re in public. Besides, Missy will be sad. Right, Missy?”

She meows in agreement, and Izuku gives her another treat as a reward. They’re currently in a cat café, Izuku having been dragged there right after school ended. He quickly picked up Missy along the way, though, feeling bad for leaving her alone the entire day.

There’s only a couple other people in the small diner, and none of them are within hearing range, so Izuku doesn’t worry about them eavesdropping. They’ve already discussed the important parts, that being about All Might and the offer and just *why the fuck did you not tell me, shitty nerd?*

It’s nearing five o’clock. They have a few hours left until Kacchan wishes to go back home to sleep. That’s another thing Izuku’s never understood: schedules. Why the *fuck* does *anyone* choose to go to sleep on time? It’s a waste of a perfectly long night.

“Actually,” Kacchan says after a while, obviously having been stewing in anger. “I’m fucking glad I said yes. You obviously didn’t want it, so there. I guess I screwed you over anyway.” He crosses his arms over his chest with a smirk. “That counts as a win.”

Izuku shakes his head vehemently. “Uh, no? It certainly does *not.”*

“Too bad. I’m one above you now.”

“Whatever. I’ll get you back one way or another.”

The two lapse into a silence as they study. Today was only the first day, so Aizawa didn’t assign any homework, though he did tell them not to expect such leniency again. So instead of homework, the both of them are working on their own little projects. While Izuku continues some analysis for his clients and upcoming missions, Kacchan starts on more ideas for his hero costume.

They haven’t even seen their costumes yet and the blond is already making improvements. Izuku handed in his own papers about his

costume a few days after his vent adventures. As much as he wanted to keep his red and green aesthetic, he can't look too similar to Rabbit or else people will raise their eyebrows.

Specifically his homeroom teacher. Izuku doesn't know how in the world he's going to survive three years as his student while also meeting with him at least once a week as his vigilante counterpart.

Ugh. Izuku has a headache now.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you before," he mumbles, still petting Missy and the other random cat that decided to jump on him. "I didn't... know how."

Kacchan just gives him a *look* before scoffing. "Whatever. I'm still not forgiving you."

The *yet* goes unspoken, and Izuku feels the tightness in his chest loosen a bit so he can breathe again. He pouts a little. "You're mean."

"I don't care. What are you working on now?"

Izuku tells him what he can about his latest assignment. He usually doesn't try to keep his missions a secret from his friend, he just doesn't go out of his way to tell him about them. Now, though, he doesn't mind. There's an arms deal going on tomorrow night, and Izuku has been ready for it for a week. It's supposedly not going to be huge, so he isn't expecting much. He already has a plan worked out and everything.

Maybe Izuku can snag some of their weapons while he's at it. Is it really stealing if he's taking it from other thieves? Doesn't it just cancel out, kind of like PEMDAS?

Izuku looks up from his rambling to see Kacchan leaning back against the booth cushions with his eyes clouded. He looks, dare Izuku say, soft.

The green haired boy feels something hard settle into the pit of his stomach. *Are you tired of me yet?*

Kacchan must notice his expression, because his eyes sharpen and narrow on him. "Did I say you could fucking stop talking?"

And Izuku smiles, entirely content in this moment. Because right now, with the both of them drinking tea in a café with Missy and some

other cats on his lap, everything seems okay. Kacchan doesn't know about the blood that's now constantly threatening to escape Izuku's lips again. Doesn't know about the thoughts that plague his mind due to *Extract* once the ring comes off.

He knows about One for All now. That's one less secret, Izuku figures, but it doesn't feel like it lightened the load any.

Izuku is going to have a meeting with the doctor tomorrow. The one at the Club—the only one he trusts with his secrets. *All* of them. Professional help, that's what he needs, and that's what he's going to get.

He'll ask the doctor what's wrong with him, and only then can he figure out what to do.

The suppressor he made doesn't seem to be capable of permanently fixing his issues, and he doesn't know if there's anything he can do about it.

He can only hope there is.

Chapter End Notes

a

waiting to fall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Alright, who can find the mistake in the following English sentence?”

Silence follows Present Mic’s question, which is a big mood. Izuku is sitting in his assigned seat on only the second day of school, bored out of his mind.

He *knows* English. His bitch of a father made him learn it because, and he quotes, *it’s always beneficial to be well-versed in every tongue. You never know when you might need it.*

Izuku knows a few other languages, too, but he’s not as fluent in them as he is in English. Which means he’s busy scribbling in his journal and *acting* like he’s taking notes when in reality he’s finishing his analysis on the arms deal he busted a few hours ago.

He’s not tired, not at all; he’s past that point. He’s had so little sleep in the past few days that his grip on reality and emotions has left him. Everything is a blur now, just simple dull colors.

The deal went well, but he’d almost been caught smuggling a few of the weapons out. He could only get away with a small rocket launcher and another flamethrower, but the latter apparently has a longer range than his older, slightly more broken one does, so he likes to think that it was definitely worth the trouble.

All in all, it was a good night. He’s going to pick up his check later at the Club when he goes to talk with the doctor, which means he can go grocery shopping for more supplies. He’s low on tuna for Missy, for one. He also needs more bandages and antiseptic for his patrols.

“Come on everybody, hands up! Show me some spirit!”

Izuku hides a small smirk at that. The rest of his classmates all have the same emotions on their faces: boredom, irritation, and confusion. Only a few are actually paying attention, namely Iida and that one girl with the high black ponytail.

Overachievers, Izuku thinks, but then decides that that’s too harsh. After all, he’d be in the same boat if he didn’t already know the

language being taught. *The conjunction is in the wrong place. It'd be choice four.*

Iida answers correctly as well, and Izuku goes back to his journal. He can move on to his notes about his classmates now that his previous analysis is done.

He knows his classmates' names courtesy of UA's private files and records, but that doesn't mean he actually *uses* them. He can't really bother to get to know them personally. It's not like they could be bothered with talking to him, either. Uraraka and Iida are the only exceptions. They're outliers; they weren't *supposed* to become friends with him, and yet they had under their own discretion.

Which is suspicious.

In the morning, students have normal classes just like everyone else. English is by far Izuku's favorite, not only because he gets to basically slack off the entire time, but also because he gets to talk more with Present Mic.

No, *Yamada-sensei.* He's his teacher now, the same as Aizawa. Not just some random hero who'd been kind enough to give him Slim Jims at the local laundromat. He teaches him English now. He's his *teacher.* The man was excited when he first laid eyes on him in class, and he didn't hesitate to call him out with a loud greeting.

The rest of Izuku's classmates probably think he's a teacher's pet, not that the boy cares that much. Not when it concerns Yamada.

Midnight teaches modern hero art history, and while Izuku hates the subject itself, he's relieved to say that the R-rated hero actually makes it interesting. He doesn't dislike it that much anymore. Cementoss is boring, but that's to be expected with the subject he teaches: modern literature. Ectoplasm is by far the most exciting, though. Izuku *loves* math. He loves the challenge of working out problems with set formulas and solutions. He likes math because there's always an answer no matter what the question is, and because usually there are multiple ways you can solve said problem. It gets his brain moving faster than any fight, and so Izuku can already tell he's going to be looking forward to that period each and every day.

At lunchtime, the students eat top-notch food for dirt cheap in the cafeteria. Izuku is very glad that UA offers a free line, as he wouldn't be able to afford to eat their food every day anyway. The free line doesn't have that many choices, but Izuku doesn't care at all. The

plain white rice is comforting, and it fills him up quicker than most foods, so it's a win-win.

Lunch Rush is weird to look at in person, but that doesn't stop Izuku from getting his autograph. The cook hero seemed very flattered when he asked for it.

After lunch, it's time for the afternoon class, which is what *everyone* has been looking forward to: hero basics training!

Izuku perks up when he feels that familiar core of energy strolling up to the classroom from the hallway, and he only has to fake half of his surprise when All Might throws open the door and says, in a booming voice, "I have come through the door like a normal person!" He lets out his signature laugh, and Izuku just shakes his head.

His position is *anything* but normal. He's using the doorframe to lean forward on his tiptoes, his cape billowing forward and around his body as his head is thrown up to look at the ceiling in a weird pose.

It's amazing no one's ever called him out for acting like an excitable puppy. A puppy that can kill you in at least twenty different ways in under three seconds, but a puppy nonetheless.

The rest of the class seems to have differing thoughts than Izuku, as most of them gasp and start chatting amongst themselves immediately.

"It's All Might? Incredible!"

"He's really gonna teach us! The schedules were right!"

"He looks so different in person. It gives me goosebumps!"

And if Izuku is still a little starstruck even after knowing the man for close to a year, then nobody but himself has to know. Besides, *is that his Silver Age costume?*

"Hero Basic Training!" All Might booms, jumping onto the teacher's desk in the front of the classroom so he can strike another interesting pose. "The class that'll put you through all sorts of special training to mold you into heroes!"

It gets you a helluva lot of credits, too, not that I really need them.

"There's no time to dally, as I'm sure you all know who I am! Today's

activity is this!" All Might pulls out a large card and presents it to the class. "Battle training!"

For a moment there, Izuku is sure he just ascended, as the endorphins that immediately rush to his brain at the words are comparable to the ones you get from the crack you buy off of some twitchy drug dealer on the side of the road at two in the morning; the *good shit.*

"Oh, fuck yeah," Izuku whispers, catching sight of Kacchan's almost shark-like grin.

"And for that," All Might continues, having not noticed the duo practically getting high off the words alone, "you need these!"

He clicks a button, and then the wall to the left of Izuku starts to shift and buzz, revealing multiple rows of lockers with large numbers on them. They're not even done pulling out all the way before some of the students are out of their seats and rushing towards them. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what's inside.

"In accordance with the Quirk Registry and the special request forms you filled out upon being admitted, I present to you, *your costumes!"*

Kacchan is the first one up and unlocking his locker, but instead of following suit like normal, Izuku forces himself to stay seated and wait until the clamor dies down. He already knows the general basis of what his costume looks like. While he personally *wanted* the design to be similar to that of his Rabbit costume, Izuku knew how terrible of a decision that would be. So, to pay a little homage to his vigilante persona, the only thing he added was little bunny ears to the hood. Not quite the same as the ones on the vigilante costume, but similar enough.

"After you change, come out in ranking order to Ground Beta!" All Might watches them all scramble to open their metal boxes and take a peek at what's inside. "Looking good is very important, students! So look alive now, because from today on, you're all heroes!"

Heroes. Izuku repeats the word in his head, as if trying it out for size. Just a few months ago, he probably would've laughed had someone told him he'd be here right now, receiving training and guidance to be the one thing he thought he could never hope to be.

"Damn right we are," Kacchan says, dropping Izuku's costume onto the boy's desk. He says it pointedly, obviously smug at the fact that his friend is going to UA with him after all.

No, they're not. They're not heroes *yet.* All Might's thinking is flawed, Izuku thinks. They still have three years to go, and that's if they even make it that far.

But all too soon all of the students are making their way onto the specified grounds with their costumes on, ready for the new challenge. Izuku had successfully dodged any possible social interactions in the locker room by staying close to Kacchan, so that's a plus.

"Well," All Might starts, grinning. "Shall we begin, my wards? It's time for battle training!"

If Izuku didn't know the hero outside of school, he'd probably think All Might has a permanent smile on his face at all times.

"You really went through with those fucking ears, huh?" Kacchan mutters to him, scowling. Now, Izuku can safely say that Kacchan has a permanent *scowl.*

"I did," Izuku says hotly. "And what of it?"

"Nothing you damn nerd. You just look ridiculous."

Izuku feigns a gasp of horror, only to see Uraraka bouncing up to them at the corner of his eye. The brunette must've heard the tail end of their conversation.

"I don't think it looks bad at all, Deku! Very practical and intense looking!" She blushes then, as if shy. "I wish I would've been more specific on my request forms. It's embarrassing how puffy and curvy my suit is."

Izuku honestly doesn't think it's embarrassing at all. The brunette's costume compliments her features, though he can definitely see how it might be uncomfortable for her. Hell, *Izuku* would be uncomfortable with a suit as skintight as that.

"Being in the hero course is the best," a voice from below says, and Izuku has to stop himself from punting the speaker once he sees who it is.

It's the little grape fucker. The one that Izuku hadn't missed being grabby and disrespectful to the girls yesterday during the apprehension test. Why he's still here is a mystery to Izuku, as he knows that Aizawa has expelled students for way less than the chaos Pervy Boy is sure to bring.

He's staring at Uraraka's suit, which is *not* going to fly.

“Wow, and I thought I was short,” Izuku says lowly, glaring pointedly at the other student and effectively warding him off. It’s a good thing, too, as Kacchan looked ready to blow any minute.

“Are we all here, then?” All Might cuts in from where he’s standing at the entrance to the battle zone. “Looking good!”

His eyes meet Izuku’s, and then the hero suddenly covers his mouth and turns away, leaving the boy frowning. *Is he making fun of my costume?*

“Sensei!” Iida says, always the most outspoken of the class. “This appears to be the same field used in the entrance exam. Will we once again be performing cityscape maneuvers?”

The blue-haired teen looks badass in his knight costume, which goes well with his personality and quirk. Izuku likes it a lot.

All Might seems to recover from his giggling fit. “Nope! You’ll be moving on to step two: indoor anti-personnel battle training!”

And *oh?* Izuku is vibrating with so much excitement that Kacchan has to physically shove him to get him to stop rocking back and forth on his heels.

“Villain battles are most commonly seen outdoors, but statistically, the most heinous villains are more likely to appear indoors!”

That’s true. Izuku would definitely know, too. Between confinement, house arrest, and black market deals, the cleverest of villains lurk indoors. Why would they commit crime more often in public when there’s more chance of a hero catching you? That’s another problem with the hero-filled society these days; while they can’t really help it, they push outdoor criminals into underground dealings and make some matters worse.

“You’ll now be split into villain teams and hero teams,” All Might continues, “to face off in two-on-two indoor battles!”

It’s Izuku’s turn to shove his friend when Kacchan won’t stop cackling maniacally.

“What about basic training?” The girl with the frog quirk asks, and Izuku can’t help but agree.

The situation is dangerous. The number one hero before them is supposed to be *training* them on how to use their quirks and hone their skills, not be throwing them into a battle setting and hoping for the best. But again, Izuku can't really find it in himself to complain.

All Might clenches a fist. "Practical experience teaches you the basics! The distinction here is that you won't be fighting disposable robots."

"What determines victory?" High Ponytail asks.

"Can I just blast everyone away?" Kacchan grumbles, causing Izuku to snort.

Uraraka looks concerned. "Are you threatening to expel someone like Aizawa-sensei did?"

"How do we proceed to divide ourselves into teams?" Iida throws in amongst the onslaught of questions.

"How fabulous is my cape?"

That last one makes Izuku whip around to stare at the boy with the naval laser. "Very fabulous," he answers, receiving a surprised yet pleased laugh in response.

"One at a time! My quirk isn't super hearing!" All Might looks distressed with having to deal with so many teenagers. "Actually, just listen up! The villains will be hiding a nuclear weapon in the hideout, and it's the heroes' job to go in and take care of it!"

A plot from a western comic, Izuku realizes. He sees where the inspiration came from.

All Might whips out a cheat sheet. "The heroes have a limited amount of time to either capture the villains or secure the weapon. The villains must either capture the heroes or protect the weapon until the time is up!" He protrudes a few boxes out of nowhere. "Your battle partners will be decided by drawing lots!"

"Is that really the best way?" Iida asks, sounding scandalized.

The ponytail girl responds instead of All Might, largely because the hero doesn't have a good answer. "That would make sense seeing as pros often have to team up with heroes from other agencies on the spot during emergencies."

Huh. But this isn't an emergency? This is a training exercise.

"I see!" Iida retracts. "I apologize for getting ahead of myself. My mistake!"

All Might just waves him off and gets right into business. The teams turn out to be pretty well-balanced, in Izuku's own opinion. He unfortunately didn't get partnered with Kacchan, but he is with Uraraka.

The brunette smiles widely and pumps her fists in the air. "Nice! It must be fate! Let's do this!"

Izuku can only pity poor Iida, who'd been partnered up with Kacchan of all people.

"Moving on! First up is—" All Might draws two lots from their respective boxes. "—Hero Team A versus Villain Team D!"

Alright, maybe Izuku had been wrong. Maybe the gods do favor him. He glances at Kacchan, who is looking at him like Christmas just came early. And honestly, it kind of did; the present being a chance to go all out on each other with their new costumes and, in Kacchan's case, support gear.

This is about to get *funky*.

The villain team goes in first. The timer is set for five minutes when Izuku and Uraraka sneak in. The rest of the students will be watching the cameras from a basement monitor room in a building off to the side.

While All Might tells the villain team to adopt a villain mindset and not hold back, Izuku is busy heading out into the city and plotting the best course of action with Uraraka.

"The building blueprints," Uraraka says to herself, holding the paper given to them by All Might in hand. "Better memorize this! There's no punishment for failure like with Aizawa-sensei, so I'm not too worried! All Might is nice, just like on TV." She glances at him, eyes widening. "Woah, you look focused, Deku!"

Izuku, who'd been staring intently off into space, tilts his head in consideration. "Well, we are up against Kacchan and Iida, who are both very powerful by themselves. It'd be better to stay on guard."

“Oh, yeah,” Uraraka says, looking sad all of a sudden. “Bakugou is the one who bullies you, right?”

And *that* jolts Izuku out of his planning. He turns to her with a frown. “Um, not really? We’re best friends, actually. Have been since we were babies! He may be a jerk, but he’s still amazing! His goals and confidence make him very strong, so I kind of look up to him, y’know? He's very nice when he wants to be.”

Uraraka hums, her attention still trained on him. Izuku is slightly put off by that; he’s not used to being *listened* to. He’s never had the pleasure of having the floor to himself for very long, if at all, so he doesn’t know how to feel by the change.

“He doesn’t work well with other people, though,” he continues. “So he’s definitely going to leave Iida on guarding duty to target me. We’ve gotta be ready for that. I really don’t wanna lose to him since we’ve kind of got a running bet going on.”

If he wins this, he’ll rub it in my face for the rest of time. It’ll also count as another point in our personal fighting scores, which will put him back in the lead.

Yeah. Over Izuku’s dead body.

“Indoor anti-personnel battle training. Start.”

Izuku doesn’t hesitate at the announcement. He grabs Uraraka’s hand and rushes further into the faux city, searching for the building All Might described. He mutters plans and different theories under his breath the whole way, and it’s only when they’re climbing in through a window that Izuku realizes Uraraka could hear him the entire time.

“Successful infiltration,” she states happily.

“Lots of blind corners,” Izuku says lowly, eyes immediately scouring the halls around them. “We have to watch out.”

He still can’t regulate One for All perfectly—not even close, actually. So it’s best if he refrains from using it directly on another student. The ring on his finger only provides so much help in controlling the output. A good thing, too, as one hundred percent power would most definitely kill them.

But with Uraraka’s zero gravity and his own enhancements, even if he’s limited with what he can do with One for All, they should be fine.

They still stand a damn good chance.

Scope out the whole place. Gotta remember my notes on indoor scenarios and tight spaces in general.

Izuku feels him before he hears him. *Extract* goes off like an alarm in his head, and the boy only just has time to duck as Kacchan comes flying at him from behind the corner of a wall, explosions leaving his palms. Izuku drops low to the ground and instinctively reaches a hand up to grab his friend by the ankle. *Boost* is almost always active now, so the slight burning in his limbs is barely noticeable as he throws Kacchan against the opposite wall.

He stays crouched with Uraraka in a defensive position a little ways behind him, and he tracks Kacchan's movements as his friend regains his balance. "A sneak attack, huh?"

"Nice dodging, nerd," the blond responds, and it only sounds half-sarcastic. "I admit, I'm excited to beat your ass this time around."

So is Izuku. Well, not to *get* his ass beat, but to *give* the ass beating. They've never fought each other like this before, not in a battle setting that's intended to mock real life. They've only ever fought directly in hand-to-hand combat, so this is a nice change of pace. One that they probably didn't need but wanted all the same.

Izuku isn't given a chance to reply before Kacchan is rushing at him again. Now, *this* is familiar. This is something he can get behind.

Kacchan always leads with a right hook. Even after so many fights with each other, some things never change.

He sidesteps and grabs one of the large gauntlets on the other teen's wrist, skillfully throwing him over his shoulder. He didn't even have to use *Boost* for that.

Kacchan was prepared for it, though, as he grabs Izuku's hoodie and brings him down with him. They start to grapple, which is how their fights usually start. The next ten seconds are crucial, as that's when the power play can be flipped into the other's favor.

Without Izuku's enhancements, Kacchan is objectively stronger than him due to his size and weight. That's why wrestling is usually straightforward for them when they don't use their quirks. If Izuku can't find a pressure point in time, he'll get pinned down for the count.

Now, though, he can use *Boost* and One for All. So when Kacchan flips him over and points a smoking palm at him in warning, it's almost too easy for Izuku to send the boy skidding back with a super-powered punch to the gut.

Now the blond is standing in between Izuku and Uraraka, who looks to be itching to help with the fight but also stuck on what to do.

There's the crackle of static, and Izuku hears someone speaking through Kacchan's transceiver. He can barely make out the words, but he doesn't have to as Kacchan responds even before his teammate finishes: "Shut up and keep watch! I'm about to wreck someone!"

Izuku begs to differ.

His friend never wastes time. Kacchan is after him once more, completely ignoring Uraraka standing behind him. That's one of his only faults, Izuku thinks. When he gets something in his head, he's too stubborn to listen to anyone else.

"Find the bomb, Uraraka!" Izuku calls, hand already reaching into his pocket to get out the capture tape All Might had given them. He twists it around Kacchan's ankle, dodging the kick aimed at his side, and tries to throw him off balance. His attempts are blasted off immediately, however, and the heat of the mini-explosion has Izuku backing off and taking stock of the situation in the blink of an eye.

"Worry about yourself, Deku!" Kacchan hisses.

Uraraka is already gone, which is a big relief. They only have fifteen minutes; it would be stupid for both of them to waste it on subduing Kacchan. The best Izuku can do is hold him off or end up capturing him while Uraraka goes for the weapon. The only problem is that Iida is most likely guarding it. While Izuku has no qualms about Uraraka's capabilities, he still doesn't want to leave her alone to fight him. A two-v-one is a better chance, anyway. With their combination of quirks, it'd be almost a guaranteed win.

A harsh blow to the head makes Izuku stumble, bringing him out of his thoughts.

"Daydreaming, hah?" Kacchan jabs, falling back into his usual pattern of tease-and-hit. "Is this as boring for you as it is for me, nerd?"

"The only thing boring me is your face."

Izuku expects the punch and works around it, trying to wrap the capture tape yet again anywhere on him. His attempt earns him a heated strike to the face, and Izuku doesn't allow himself to think twice about his next actions before turning tail and running.

He had him, but it doesn't seem that capture tape can hold him. His only excuse for fleeing is that he needs to come up with a better strategy. Sure, he could sit there for quite a while and fight with Kacchan, but that wouldn't be beneficial in the long run. They're all being graded individually, not on if they won or lost. Technique matters, something that Kacchan lacks in some ways.

Iida should've been the vanguard, given his superior maneuverability, and Izuku suspects that the boy knew this. So Izuku had been right: this is just Kacchan rampaging on his own to have an excuse to fight Izuku. There's no teamwork on the villain side.

If both of them had come right at us from the start, our chances at winning would've been much slimmer. It was a good plan, splitting up with Uraraka. Izuku just has to find a way to incapacitate Kacchan and then go after her.

Sounds easy enough, right? So then why is he suddenly getting this bad feeling in his stomach?

"Deku!"

He straightens up immediately, pressing on the transceiver near his ear. "Uraraka! What is it?"

"Iida found me! Sorry!" She sounds a bit shaky. *"I'm inching back, but __"*

"Where are you?"

"Fifth floor, right in the center!"

Oh. That's right above Izuku. That'll make this easier then. There's only a little time left, so the win will belong to the villains if he doesn't do anything soon. He can't lose. Not here, at least. He may not have much pride, but he refuses to get bested by his friend.

Izuku is crouched and ready by the time Kacchan rounds the corner, having finally found him.

"I'm loaded up," the blond threatens. A predatory look passes across

his face. “Why not use them? You mocking me, nerd?”

The boy freezes. The words are ominous at most to others, but they mean a lot to Izuku. *Why not use them? Is he talking about what I think he’s talking about?*

His friend must notice the change in his expression, as he laughs. It sounds sharp, like nails on a chalkboard. *He's upset about something,* Izuku thinks. *Fuck, what is he planning? Why didn't I notice this before now?*

“Come on. I’m not accepting an easy win, got it?”

Oh, he is *definitely* talking about what Izuku thinks he is.

“Kacchan,” he says tightly, a clear warning. This doesn’t seem like a funny battle anymore. It’s almost unnerving how quickly everything turned.

Christ. How long have you been thinking about this, Kacchan?

“Guessin’ you know this since you helped me design them,” Kacchan starts, gesturing with one of his large gauntlets. “But I’ll explain anyway for the extras that don’t know. Assuming those asshats honored the design requests, this gauntlet’s been storing the nitroglycerin in my sweat for one grand explosion.”

Oh fuck. Izuku knows exactly what’s coming, as he had indeed helped his friend with the idea of those support items. He hadn’t done much of the design, only the mechanical part of it, but he’d looked at it enough to know that right now he’s royally screwed.

Static crackles on all of the students’ transceivers, and All Might’s voice sounds in their ears. *“Bakugou, stop it now! You trying to kill him?”*

Kacchan widens his stance and grabs at the pin. “He won’t die if he dodges!” His tone drops considerably, and he's not smiling anymore. His face looks grim. “Or if he deflects.”

Deflect.

It’s altogether too clear what he’s doing now. He’s trying to make him use his quirks. He’s probably more focused on One for All, as he’s already gotten a taste of some of Izuku’s other quirks, but still. The explosive teen has never accepted half-assed battles from him. He

won't accept a win like this, either. Not that Izuku would ever let him win, but that's not the point. There's another part of Izuku's mind that's nagging at him.

He wants me to use my quirks so All Might will see, isn't he? He's trying to expose me, but why? Because he thinks I can get help now just because I'm at UA?

That's probably not it, Izuku knows, but the thought stays nonetheless. He'd like to hope that Kacchan isn't that stupid. He's *never* like this.

"Why don't you just tell them, shitty nerd? They could help."

"You know why."

Izuku lied to him for three weeks about inheriting All Might's quirk. This next thought is also unfair, but perhaps Kacchan is doing this to get back at him for that, saying as he just found out yesterday.

Ping.

The pin falls to the ground, and the sudden wave of heat and pressure that washes over Izuku has him gritting his teeth to stop himself from crying out as he's thrown back a few feet. The smoke goes up his lungs and he coughs, trying to right himself lest his friend tries to attack him directly. He glances up, jaw dropping.

The entire side of the building has crumbled away, chunks of debris having been blown to the floor and ground far below.

"Awesome, huh?" Kacchan asks, stalking towards him.

Any other time and Izuku would have agreed. Instead of answering, though, he presses on his earpiece. He can't do anything about the situation now, so he has to make do. He has to focus on the objective here, because Kacchan isn't going to get what he wants. "What's happening, Uraraka?"

There's no reply at first.

"Ooh, ignoring me, eh?" His friend says.

"Bakugou." The transceiver cuts in, but it's not Uraraka's voice, it's All Might's. *"Use that move again and I will forcibly end the match. You will lose. Using massive attacks like that indoors is just asking to have your own stronghold destroyed."*

A good way to lose points, too, Izuku thinks absentmindedly.

Kacchan throws his head back in irritation. “Ya serious? Come on, I'm helping him!”

“Get to the pillar by the window, got it?” Izuku says into the transceiver, hoping his teammate can still hear him.

Before he can receive an answer, though, Kacchan is rushing him yet again.

Izuku can’t dodge this one. His friend will either do two things: go for a straightforward and open attack, or use his explosion to simultaneously feint to the side and change his tact. He’s done it before, and Izuku honestly isn’t able to predict which one he’ll go for this time. So, in a split-second decision, the boy spins on his heel and lets his foot crack against the side of Kacchan’s face.

Huh. He’d planned a feint after all.

Kacchan isn’t easily deterred, though, and he keeps raining miniature explosions and hits down on the other. Most likely saving for another big explosion despite All Might’s words.

And Izuku for *sure* knows what he wants now. The blond wants Izuku to use one of his other quirks, but if he's not going to do that, Kacchan is going to make him use One for All since that’s the one with the rawest power. But Izuku is still hesitant. He has his ring on. He hasn’t taken it off since he made it almost three weeks ago, and he’s not keen on doing so now.

But if he wants his plan to work perfectly, he’ll have to do it. He doesn’t think fifteen percent of One for All’s power is enough to do the damage he’s looking for, and that’s all the suppressor will allow him to do as long as it’s on.

Kacchan knows how Izuku thinks. He knows that the best way to work around his friend’s plans is to make sure he doesn’t get enough time *to* think.

He has the advantage at the moment. Izuku’s hesitance is *giving* him that advantage. He could have finished this so easily if he just used his other quirks in tandem with one another.

Izuku sees an opening and scurries back again. He’s not much of a runner, and yet he seems to find himself becoming one around

Kacchan more often than not.

“Just use ‘em, you damn nerd. I know it's not that fucking hard.”

Kacchan doesn’t sound angry anymore. He just sounds slightly annoyed, as if he wishes this could be over with. As if he truly believes he’s helping Izuku by trying to force him to use his other powers in front of an audience.

You idiot, Izuku thinks in frustration. *I've told you why I can't do this so many times before, so why are you bringing it up again? And now, of all times?*

In a moment of uncanny timing, they both race for each other, fists pulled back, but both for entirely different reasons. And at this point, Izuku has a choice. He can keep his ring on and try to carry out his plan no matter the outcome, or he can take off the suppressor and take comfort in knowing that this will work.

His body longs for the second option, and his mind pushes for the first. But all choice in the matter is taken away once Izuku thinks of what will happen if he lets himself lose. This is different than the quirk apprehension test simply because here he has something to prove here. *Boost* simply won’t be enough.

He has to do his best, at least on the outside. He owes it to his friend. He owes it to Uraraka and All Might.

If I do this, it'll shut Kacchan up and make All Might happy, I think.

By the time Kacchan’s explosion is sizzling a foot away from Izuku’s face, the boy’s ring has already been slid off his finger and is being clutched tightly in his other hand. His body and mind scream at him at the sudden onslaught of power and quirks being freed, and then Izuku’s arm feels like it’s on *fire* when he calls upon One for All to direct the explosion upward.

“Now, Uraraka!”

It works better than he thought it would. The force of the blast easily destroys the concrete floors above and below the two boys, and Izuku can faintly hear Uraraka yelling something at Iida from high above. He trusts she can do her part. Besides, he’s a little preoccupied with something.

His arm is mangled again, but that’s the least of his worries. *Extract* is

still buzzing inside of him, happy at the release. Three weeks of having that damned quirk partially suppressed, and now all of that's coming undone. Izuku can tell this because *oh god, he can feel it coming up his throat—*

He turns to the side and heaves up large clots of blood. This is worse than actual vomit because this feels heavy and warm and much *thicker* than throw-up, and for a moment Izuku thinks he's going to choke on the blood since some of it won't come out.

The boy can only pray that the cameras aren't catching this. He made sure to face away from the camera hidden in the corner of the hallway behind him, but still.

"Deku?"

Izuku slips the ring back on with a shuddering breath and immediately slumps to the floor, lifting a meek hand to wave at his traitorous friend.

"The hero team wins!"

He snorts, because yeah, he sure fucking hopes so after that shitshow.

The familiar nullification his suppressor provides is enough to give him whiplash, and dark spots corner the edges of Izuku's vision.

And isn't that just wonderful? He just has to pass out right now, huh?

Mother Nature exclaims, not two seconds after that thought, that he *does* have to pass out right now.

Again. Wonderful.

"The year's only just started and it's his third time here!"

Toshinori winces as Chiyo starts to scold him. He's in his deflated form now, having run to the nurse's office after finishing up the rest of

the battles. Midoriya was the only one with severe injuries, thank goodness, but the fact that he was injured at all to this extreme is unacceptable.

A point that Recovery Girl is quick to point out.

But even while she starts to thoroughly lecture him about why he shouldn't be indulging the boy too much despite him being his successor, and also why Toshinori must learn how to guide Midoriya properly, the hero can't find it in himself to feel too guilty.

He could hear what the two boys were saying to each other the entire time. None of the other students could. And while Toshinori was completely lost on what the hell they were talking about, he knew that it must've been important.

Midoriya wanted to *win,* and Toshinori wasn't about to be the one to take that away from him.

He just wishes the boy would stop breaking his bones all the time.

"You broke your arm."

It's not a question. More of a demand of an answer.

Izuku blinks. "Uh, yes?"

"Again?" Aizawa says, looking way too tired to be having this conversation.

"Unfortunately, sensei."

The man stares at him for a good ten seconds, and after going through what looks like the five stages of grief, just nods his head and turns back to his desk, where he promptly pulls out his sleeping bag and slides back into it. He faces the wall and starts his pre-scheduled nap, a clear dismissal.

Huh. It turns out that Izuku was unconscious for the whole rest of the day. He'd been carried out of Ground Beta by medical robots and taken to Recovery Girl to treat his injuries.

But since he hasn't gotten a wink of sleep since the day he popped out of the womb, Izuku couldn't quite get his arm healed all the way. He'll have to come back later once he is, in Recovery Girl's words, more *properly rested.*

The moment he entered the classroom, however, Izuku had been ambushed by the rest of his classmates. They all beamed at him and complimented him on his fight with Bakugou, and they talked about how pumped up they all were after watching it. The names came next, and then the polite greetings.

Izuku is still, quite honestly, perplexed about the whole thing. Because that's *also* never happened to him before. He's never been complimented so generously before. And it's not like they have anything to gain, so why were they being so friendly?

The boy would like to believe they really do just want to be friends with him, but after today, he doesn't know what to expect anymore.

Speaking of. Now that he's completed his mission of innocently disturbing Aizawa's sleep schedule to pass on Recovery Girl's message, he's now searching for Kacchan, who had just clammed up and headed home during Izuku's ambush. He didn't even help his green-haired friend out.

But that's whatever. Izuku needs to talk with him, and if he has to chase him down the street to do that, then so be it.

He's not going to let his friend walk away like that. Not from him. They've been through too much together for that.

"So, what did you say happens to you when you take off the ring?"

Izuku sighs, fiddling with his cast from just a few hours before. The doctor before him is apparently very intelligent, and yet he's asking the most stupid and repetitive questions ever. "I get nauseous and end up spewing blood. That's the most vital info, but I did experience a migraine and some chronic pain after doing it today."

The young man types out another note on his computer. "Can you take off the ring for me? I want to see what happens myself."

Are you fucking serious?

"I don't think that's a good idea," Izuku says, but does so anyway with some hesitance.

Dumbass or not, the boy trusts this doctor. He's part of the reason Izuku even joined the Club anyway.

The dizziness hits him full force once again. Izuku's teeth are clenched so tightly together that it hurts his head. He's shaking, and it feels like something is buzzing, on his skin, *under* his skin, everywhere. Nausea. He feels an itch at the back of his throat and jolts forward, using his sleeve to stop the sudden mixture of saliva and crimson from hitting any of the machinery in here. That would be unsanitary, after all.

"Hm. Seems it's definitely gotten worse." The man hands him a napkin in case he continues spewing up bile. "A result of your newly acquired quirk, no doubt. You can put the ring back on, by the way."

Izuku doesn't need to be told twice. "Yeah. What can I do to fix that?"

"Well, that's not really a problem at face value. Sometimes you have to bleed to know that you're alive, right?"

Izuku rolls his eyes. The doctor's always been a bit unhinged. "Obviously I'm alive. I'm here because I want to know if I'm gonna *stay* that way. It's affecting my work. I need to fix it. The sooner the better."

"Of course. I just took your vitals, so I'll be back with the results." He stands up and makes for the door, taking the readings with him. "It'll be five minutes, tops, so don't go breaking any more bones."

"You're hilarious."

Izuku slumps in on himself the moment the doctor leaves.

He really just wants to get this over with. He came here immediately after his argument with Kacchan, which had ended in venomous words being exchanged on both sides. Neither of them meant it, but the fact still remains that Kacchan had *refused* to apologize for trying to push his friend past the breaking point, and also that Izuku had lied to Kacchan about his newest quirk in the first place. The last one is a day-old argument, by the way. One that he's already apologized for.

Something that *Kacchan* is refusing to do, even though he fully intended to make Izuku use one of his other quirks so as not to get grievously hurt by his ministrations.

It's all fucked up. Having to watch Kacchan's retreating back (since he definitely wouldn't have been welcome to walk home beside him) was one of the hardest things Izuku has ever done.

And it nearly *shattered* him.

But this is just an argument, right? They have spats all the time, and they always resolve them one way or another. So why does this one in particular hurt so *bad?*

On top of all of that, the doctor has just recently told him about why this is all happening. Well, he *guessed.* The results are coming back soon, but Izuku doesn't think the verdict's going to be any different. The man told him about how his original quirk and more recent quirk are strengthening each other. A good thing, at first thought, and exactly what Izuku had figured out on his own. But this means that it *also* increases each other's weaknesses and side effects.

In simple terms, *Extract* is causing him this much pain and annoyance *because* of One for All.

And in a sick, entirely twisted way, Izuku had already known this. How could he not, with what said quirks are fated to do to each other? But hearing it set in stone, hearing the consequences of him having both quirks at once (which are proving to be a far cry from what he'd ever expected)—it worries him. Much more than it had when he first received the quirk that fateful afternoon.

And when the doctor comes back in, exactly five minutes and sixteen seconds later, it's the look on his face that makes something inside Izuku crack. The man looks grim, as if he'd just learned something awful.

Either that or he's constipated. One can only hope it's the second.

“Well?” Izuku asks, thankful that his voice changer hides his shakiness. He still has a reputation to uphold, even here.

Even with his doctor.

The man turns to him with sad eyes, and when he opens up his mouth and reads the boy his notes, Izuku feels himself shatter a little bit more.

Chapter End Notes

walk up my spine like a rotating staircase

r

what would i do

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You know when you put a seashell against your ear, and you hear the sound that adults always tried to convince you was the sound of the sea, but as you got older you realized it was just the sound of the emptiness that filled the shell? Izuku is that sound.

He's empty and alone. So, so alone. And it's his own fault. He should've tried harder to be something that his parents could love. Should've tried harder to actually *tell* Kacchan about One for All instead of being a weak little bitch and resolving to keep it quiet. Should've tried harder to not let their simple argument turn into something bigger.

So yeah. It's no wonder he doesn't have many friends. He's pathetic.

This is all his fault. That's how it always is, right? He works toward something and hits all the right notes along the way, but then he does something stupid that screws it all up to the point of no return. It's like that's just what he was made to do: build and then destroy. He can make an entire essay on that specific argument.

It was his own stupidity that made Inko push him away. That made All for One think he'd be a good vessel for all his ideals and quirks. That made Kacchan blow up on him, which added even more strain to their all-or-nothing friendship. It was his own stupidity that made Ms. Hanako and all of the new heroes in his life trust him—and sure, he hasn't done anything to harm them specifically, but just by being who he is Izuku is putting them in danger.

What's even worse is that he's being selfish by even allowing them in his life. He said yes to One for All, knowing that the small ripple it would undoubtedly create would eventually turn into a tsunami and decimate everything in its path. He broke Kacchan's trust, and that hurts more than any blow or bullet wound.

Izuku blinks slowly, looking mutely at the streets far below him. It's always pretty at this time of night. The colorful lights of the city always serve as a reminder to Izuku of the beauty of the world, but right now it does nothing but give the boy a migraine.

He didn't plan on patrolling tonight. His arm isn't fully healed yet, after all, even though he'd taken his cast off immediately after leaving the doctor's. He should be fine if he takes it slow. Besides, the painkillers he was given don't just work for *Extract.* The regular nuances and burning in his body have been reduced to nothing more than a slight prickle.

Damn pills cost me my entire check, so I'd hope so.

Someone is speaking. His phone must still be playing the news story he was watching on YouTube a couple minutes ago, but Izuku isn't listening anymore. Only one sound is filling his ears, and it's emptiness.

He can barely remember when he used to feel. Can barely remember what love and happiness and safety and fear and despair and crushing *loneliness* felt like. It's as though Izuku only has a monthly allowance of feelings, and he's used it all up within the first few days, and now he's left empty and numb until the new month comes along.

God, he's so—so *stupid.* He should've never said yes to All Might. He should've known what would happen; should've known that the very quirk that's been giving him the only semblance of hope he's had in a *long* time would be the one to eventually kill him.

And he doesn't even fucking know when. The *why* is easy; the doctor had explained that part to him. It's the timestamp that's giving the boy a bit of an issue.

With the rate his body is going, it'll be anywhere between one and thirty years. Not very specific at all, right? Which is bullshit, because Izuku hates the unknown more than *anything* in this world. If he had a date, or at least a more specific estimate, he'd be okay. He could come to terms with it. But now he's left thinking and *worrying* about it.

He's never worried about death before. While he's never actively sought it out, it's always been at the back of his mind. He used to think that if he died, well, that was it. His death wouldn't matter in the long run, right? But now he *is* worrying. He finds that he's suddenly scared.

Not of dying, no. There are far worse things than that. He just doesn't want to leave this all behind. Not after all the hard work he's done. Not now that he's just been made All Might's successor. Not when Eraserhead and Present Mic and, hell, even Detective Tsukauchi believe in him for some odd reason.

They don't believe in just Rabbit—they believe in *Izuku.* They believe in *him.*

They've changed his outlook on life without even knowing it, and it sucks to think that it won't even matter in the future.

Izuku feels a shift in the air and straightens up, trying to force his face into a more neutral expression when he catches sight of the figure approaching. "You know, stalking a minor is illegal and can get you a minimum of two years in jail."

"You're upset."

It's blunt, as is Eraserhead's way, though not cruel. Izuku doesn't bother facing him fully. He can feel his quirk now that he's seen and heard him, which is yet another thing the boy has yet to look into more. All quirks seem to have a damper on them while their hosts are asleep or extremely tired, but with Eraserhead, it seems like the hero doesn't have a quirk factor at all without Izuku seeing or hearing him first.

Izuku hums in question. "Upset? How can you tell?"

The man sits beside him on the roof's edge—a little too close, and Izuku presses his nails into his palms to calm his discomfort. If the hero notices, he doesn't mention it. Izuku wonders if he sat close on purpose to gauge his reactions.

"Your voice," he says, like it's obvious. "It's higher than usual, even with the voice changer. It's also three in the morning, which is two hours past your normal routine."

His analysis makes Izuku tense just a fraction, but he pushes it away with a smile. "I just like the way the stars look tonight, that's all. Wanna take it all in."

Eraserhead blinks, unamused. "You can't see the stars in this part of Japan."

"Ah," Izuku nods, gravely serious. "So it must be the concussion making me see those lights."

"That's not funny."

Izuku just smirks, letting a snort escape his mouth as he swings his legs over the side like a small child, trying and failing to appear

nonchalant.

“You do remember you’re a vigilante and I can still legally kick your ass, right?” Is all Eraserhead says, eyebrow quirked, and Izuku doesn’t doubt it.

They lapse into silence, both of them feeling the cool night air and watching the city lights below them. It’s relatively quiet, save for the faint beeping of horns and hushed voices.

We have that field trip tomorrow. Izuku suddenly remembers, eyes widening under his hood. *It’s going to be even harder hiding my other abilities now.*

The boy didn't mean to find out about their trip to the USJ. Honestly. He’d been looking through their security systems, trying to see what he could possibly get away with at UA and also figure out who the *fuck* controls the hatches to the vents, when he just so happened to stumble upon the email of approval. Aizawa and All Might had asked to take them there, and Principal Nezu approved it.

So now Izuku knows about it, which is kind of thrilling and terrifying at the same time. He has a feeling the albino stoat *knows* that he knows, too, and that thought is just another thing for Izuku to worry about.

His nails dig even further into his skin, breaking the surface, and it’s Eraserhead that breaks him out of his daze.

“You can talk to me about anything, you know. Even if it’s unrelated to Rabbit.” He turns to face him, and Izuku tilts his head. “Especially if it’s unrelated.”

“Oh.” The teen wipes his hands on his dark pants and swallows something hard in his throat. At least it’s not blood this time. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

The man hums, and then the silence falls upon them once more. It’s not quite uncomfortable or awkward, hasn’t been for a long time. They’re okay around each other. They *trust* each other now. But it's a little disconcerting for Izuku to be sitting next to his teacher. The hero doesn’t even know he’s his teacher, which is the exact problem.

It’s difficult for him to connect Eraserhead and Aizawa to one person because Izuku doesn’t even see Rabbit and *himself* to be one person. When he’s Izuku, the man sitting next to him is strictly Aizawa; his

new sensei, a part-time caterpillar and hobo ninja that also happens to be UA's harshest teacher. His first time seeing Izuku was in a rundown pizzeria in the middle of the night with said boy sporting a black eye and drinking a milkshake. Now, Izuku certainly isn't the best when it comes to social interactions, but he's pretty sure that that doesn't exactly count as an ideal first impression. It doesn't help that Aizawa also caught Izuku later that same night trying to steal government files.

It's a miracle the boy hasn't been arrested for good yet.

But when Izuku is Rabbit, however, the man beside him is Eraserhead: someone who he can joke around with and trust to have his back during a fight. Someone who won't hesitate to call him out on his bullshit or even make sure he doesn't do something idiotic like litter. Someone who can match Izuku's sass and even keep up with his ramblings when he gets a little too excited.

It's the little details, Izuku thinks, that make all the difference. Logically, he *knows* that Eraserhead and Aizawa are the same person, but he can't help but think of them as two separate beings when he's forced to act differently around the man depending on who he is at the moment.

And from an outsider's perspective, Izuku can safely say that that sounds completely *fucked.* It's probably unhealthy for him to think of himself and Rabbit to be two different people, or for him to think of his teacher and his hero counterpart to be different, and yet he can't change it.

When he's Izuku, he's shy and timid. He's awkward, weak, a bit too weird and blunt when it comes to social settings in general, and a bit of a dumbass. And, sure, he may act differently when he's with someone like Kacchan, but that's to be expected. To everyone else, though, that's just who he is: easy to be pushed around, easy to be picked on.

Hell, that day when those three kids pushed him around in that alley is proof enough of that. Izuku *let* them bully him, so he doesn't have to right complain.

But Rabbit makes him feel different. He's no longer weak and pathetic. He can fight back, take on villains and challenges without breaking stride, he can *save* people. He's still a dumbass, but that's beside the point.

So now, sitting here in the comfort and safety of his Rabbit costume with Eraserhead by his side, Izuku doesn't know why he's feeling so... *weak*.

"You look dead on your feet," the hero interrupts suddenly. "Are you getting enough sleep?"

Izuku wrinkles his nose, kind of wishing the man could see it. "Are you?"

A scoff. "Seems like I'm getting more than you these days, kid. What's up?"

"Nothing, actually." Izuku leans back so he's laying on the roof, moving his arms to cross under his head. "And of course you're getting more than me. I hear old people love their naps, amirite?"

Eraserhead scowls. "I'm not that old, you brat." He leans back as well, his bones cracking and popping along the way. Izuku opens his mouth, eyes alight with mischief, but the hero just glares at him. "Not one word."

Izuku giggles and goes back to staring at the sky. The man is right. You can't see the stars in Japan. Not in this city, at least. A few districts over, where there are less traffic and lights, and you might just be able to.

Missy hasn't been anywhere besides Musutafu. I should find the time to take her stargazing once I finally get everything figured out.

If the boy can even make it that long.

He winces, the reminder leaving a sour taste on his tongue. He still can't quite make sense of it. It's not exactly denial, more of a delayed reaction. The meaning hasn't really set in yet.

"You can talk to me about anything."

Izuku finds himself speaking before he can think better of it.

"If you went to the doctor," he begins quietly, carefully, "and they told you it was too late for treatment, what would you do?"

Eraserhead shifts his head to look at him, and Izuku pretends he doesn't notice.

There's a brief pause spent with Izuku fidgeting under the man's

intense gaze, and when the hero speaks, it's low and slightly suspicious. "What do you mean? Are you hurt?"

Izuku coughs, head thunking back against the concrete. "Ah! No! It's just a hypothetical question."

"Hypothetical?" He echoes, unconvinced.

"Yeah!" Izuku forces himself to calm down. If he freaks out now, the hero will see right through him. "I just read something the other day and was curious about what you'd do. Like what if you'd suddenly lose your balance out of nowhere, and your vision would wipe out for a few seconds at a time? And, uh, maybe you couldn't swallow anything other than liquids on the worst days?" The boy takes in a quick breath, deciding to just go all in. "You'd have such a burning in your throat that sometimes you cough up blood and dry heave? Oh, and nausea, too! You'd feel nauseous a lot."

When Izuku stops rambling, Eraserhead is still staring at him with those all-knowing eyes.

He hesitates, which is something unusual in itself. "Is this honestly just hypothetical?"

"I know this is hard for you."

Izuku thinks of the bottle of pills the doctor gave him just a few hours prior. He thinks of the blood he feels constantly gathering at the back of his throat, only held back by the ring on his finger. He thinks of the singular cure the doctor presented him with, of the words that had Izuku stomping off the Club's grounds before the sentence could even finish.

"But you should consider tying up any loose ends while you still have the chance. If you won't accept the cure, then the amount of time you have left is not long."

Is that even fair? To burden Eraserhead with his troubles? After all the man has done for him? No. It's not. And besides, if Izuku told him, their dynamic would change drastically. The hero would no doubt force him into some type of experimentation if only to try and find another cure for his *condition.* Another cure that, according to the doctor, doesn't exist.

Izuku only has one option, and he's not going to take it.

I can't let him know.

"Yes," he breathes, and the lie is so heavy on his tongue that Izuku has to bite his lip to stop himself from screaming the truth. "Of course."

Eraserhead doesn't answer immediately. He seems to be searching for something on Izuku's face; not that it matters much because of the mask, however.

"First," the black-haired man says slowly. "I would talk to someone. Another medical professional to get their own opinion on the matter. Sometimes you need another pair of eyes. I would also tell friends or family that I trust." His eyes flash red for the briefest of seconds. "Lying to them about it would be like lying to yourself."

The last part is a jab: a clear warning. It's clear that he's testing him, but for what, Izuku doesn't know. To see if he's included on that very short list of people that Izuku trusts? To see if the vigilante will actually heed his advice for once instead of brushing it off? The why remains unclear, though it could be either. Maybe even both.

"Oh," Izuku says intelligently.

Eraserhead could set him on fire with that intense expression he's wearing right now. He's looking at Izuku as if he's a puzzle, as if he's something that needs to be figured out or put together.

The boy doesn't want to be figured out. He isn't a puzzle; he's one singular piece, and he isn't sure where he fits in just yet.

Izuku settles on a cough before standing up. "Thank you for the input. It's about time I go, though. I wanna get in another round before daylight!"

He throws in a wink for good measure, spinning on his heel and making for the neighboring rooftop.

Eraserhead's suspicious gaze feels hot on his back.

The day starts off bad and only gets worse.

He's hounded by a sea of reporters the moment he rounds the corner of UA's street and steps toward its gates. The vultures are busy harassing students and teachers as they walk through the entrance, and most of the students seem to be enjoying the attention. Others, however, do not.

Izuku is one of them.

It doesn't help that he's already agitated and sleep-deprived from his patrol. A criminal decided to be a little extra for him and sprayed him with pepper spray. Now, Izuku doesn't really need to rely on his vision to be able to tell where everything around him is, but the short moment of burning and hissing upon contact had still given the criminal enough time to smash a crowbar into the boy's kneecaps.

Now he has a limp on his left side, a pair of red, puffy eyes with dark bags underneath them, and a bad temper on top of all of that. Missy also decided to scratch him before he left for school, probably in an attempt to stop him from mixing that energy drink with his coffee, but whatever. She's still in the wrong.

Even if he did steal that can of Red Bull.

And it *also* sucks that Kacchan doesn't even look at him as he shoves past his friend on the pathway leading up to the gate. Yep. They're definitely not on speaking terms. Why would they be when it's only been a day since the battle trials?

"Hey, kid, you're in the Hero Course! Tell us about All Might!"

Izuku yawns, not sparing the reporter a glance as the crowd turns to him like sharks smelling blood. "No."

"Oh, c'mon! One sentence, kid, and then we'll let you leave!"

Let. The boy almost laughs at the irony. Do they really think they have him trapped? And also, how stupid do they think he is? Reporters are vultures. They'll just dig for more after the first tease of information, and even then they won't stop until they gnaw the carcass clean.

A few men with cameras step in front of him, blocking him. Izuku would feel almost threatened if it'd been any other time. His sleep-deprived self is too out of it to even process what the fuck is happening.

“You’re All Might’s student!” One of them starts, pressing the button on their camera and making it blink red. “Tell us how the Symbol of Peace is managing to teach the next generation of heroes!”

“Please move.” He may be agitated, but he still has manners. At least when they’re recording him. After all, he’s gotta keep up that perfect image of himself, no matter how nonexistent it may be.

“Kid, over here! How does it feel to be taught by the number one hero, someone who isn’t even certified to train students?”

The phrasing of the question strikes Izuku as odd, and the boy stops pushing past the reporters to spin around and face the woman, taking a long swig of his flask before opening his mouth, as if to answer her question. All of the reporters lean forward with bated breath, ready for the tea he’s about to spill—only to shrink back in disgust when Izuku dips his head down to deepthroat the mic.

It tastes like a sponge, which, in all fairness, is what’s covering the microphone. The lady yanks it back with a shriek: “What the *fuck?”*

Izuku just takes another sip of his abomination of an energy drink and turns away, aware of the fearful looks from the passing students and the shocked murmurs from the reporters behind him.

Huh. At least they’re not harassing students anymore.

Recovery Girl was less than pleased when he came in without his cast on. She scolded him furiously about the dangers of not taking his injuries seriously and about not listening to doctor’s orders, and Izuku could do nothing but sheepishly apologize.

She went on to warn him that if he got another stupid injury, she wouldn’t be the one to heal him. He’s already starting to accumulate scars on his hand, a fact that she made sure he was aware of. Izuku doesn’t blame her for her harshness, though. It’s his own fault he got injured anyway.

“You still look exhausted,” she lectures with a click of her tongue, “but I guess it’ll have to do. If you fall asleep in class, boy, that’s on you. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you again.”

The old lady just shakes her head and points to the door, ranting quietly to herself about how Izuku is apparently just like All Might. The boy refrains from pointing out that that’s not actually the worst thing.

At least he’s not limping anymore. He’s not even tired now thanks to his *even-god-is-disappointed-in-this* energy drink.

So now he’s sitting at his desk, vibrating slightly with the pent-up energy and having to listen to Aizawa drone on about how he reviewed their grades and evaluations from their battle training.

“Bakugou. Grow up already. Stop wasting your talent.”

Any other time and Izuku would’ve laughed. The blond in front of him growls at the order but grinds out a *got it* anyways.

“Midoriya.” The boy in question blinks, feeling like he’s about to astral project. “Learn to control your quirk. I hate repeating myself, but breaking a limb every time you go overboard isn’t going to cut it. Work at it.”

Izuku nods in understanding, biting his tongue to keep a snarky reply from pushing past his lips. That’s one of the bad things about this state of his: it makes him have trouble keeping a filter. He can’t afford to slip up here.

On an unrelated note, does Aizawa allow drinks other than water in his classroom? Because Izuku has a can of cold lemonade he stole from the vending machine on his way here after leaving the nurse’s office, and he’s already downed half of his energy drink and coffee mixture. The lemonade is sitting just inside his backpack, but he doesn’t want to risk taking it out lest Aizawa confiscates it.

The teacher goes on to do short reviews of everyone else, and Izuku is left feeling kind of intrigued. He'd missed the trials for the rest of the teams since he fainted, but after his impromptu meeting with Eraserhead and another hour of patrol, Izuku had gone home and busied himself with analyzing the footage for his notes.

UA really needs to review their security if I can get into it this easily.

Izuku is curious as to what Aizawa thinks of the trials, and it comes as a surprise when the hero doesn't even comment on Todoroki's unnecessary display of power. While strong indeed, the boy's lack of communication and teamwork would have been a major downfall had this been a real situation. Even Izuku, who's shit at every social interaction, had managed to scrape up enough effort to create a plan with his teammate.

That boy's got daddy issues written all over him. Izuku wants to pick him *apart.* There are so many things he needs to ask him about his quirk, and also his home life—though that last part will probably get him frozen. Speaking of, why hasn't the teen used his left side the entire time here? He only uses it for a short amount of time to melt the ice he creates, but nothing any longer than that. Doesn't his file say that his fire holds more strength than his ice? So why does he favor the ice?

Izuku just needs to talk to him so he can fill out the blanks in his analysis notebook.

"Now, on to homeroom business. Sorry for the sudden announcement, but today you'll be picking your class president."

Oh no. It's such a normal, school-like thing that Izuku wants to bang his head against his desk. His headache is back full force, and he's not in the mood to have to deal with the immediate response this elicits from his classmates. Most of them start to shout over one another to be heard, as if the loudest voice will be automatically granted the position. Izuku understands the thrill, though.

While class councils don't mean much in elementary school, they have a whole new meaning in high school. Especially since this is the hero's course. It means leading the group; it's a position suited for a top hero in the making. One that doesn't have a temper as short as Endeavor's.

Iida thankfully gets everyone to quiet down by warning them of the troubles of leadership, and also of the responsibilities a class president would have. "This sacred office demands the trust of its constituents! If this is to be a democracy, then I put forward the notion that our true leader is chosen by election!"

Izuku doesn't care much about the argument that ensues, but he does think that things are a bit haywire. This is just a classroom, after all, not the government. Though this does seem to be the only logical way to complete the task of choosing council members. Iida has a point

when he says that anyone who actually manages to earn multiple votes will be the best individual for the job.

But what's surprising is that Aizawa actually allows the vote to happen, and what's even *more* surprising is finding out that he has *three fucking votes.*

Which puts him at the top, making him the class president and the high ponytail girl named Yaoyorozu the vice president.

Kacchan immediately explodes out of his seat. “What the hell! Who voted for shitty Deku!”

Well, guess I know you weren’t one of them, though I expected as much.

Iida hisses quietly to himself about how he got zero votes, reasoning that this is the harsh reality of this office. It seems he’s taking this a bit too seriously, or perhaps as serious as a class president should.

Izuku really wants to know why the hell he was even voted for, but then the lunch bell rings and the class is dismissed, leaving Izuku standing at the front of the classroom with Yaoyorozu for a few awkward seconds. He should probably say something to her, but then he thinks better of it and walks away.

Like a complete asshat.

She actually deserves a high position, in Izuku’s own opinion, as she’s really intelligent and can analyze things on the spot, so for Izuku to get class president—a rank above her? He’s incredibly confused.

Have his classmates been looking at a different version of Izuku this entire time? Perhaps one that didn’t break his arm just the day before during a silly exercise?

Yeah. It doesn’t make sense to him. Not at all.

Izuku doesn’t sit with Kacchan at lunch this time. His blond friend instead hangs near Kirishima and his friend group, and Izuku isn’t jealous. Nope. If anything, he’s actually quite happy to see the boy hanging out with other people.

The green-haired boy is pulled to sit with Iida and Uraraka, and Izuku catches sight of Todoroki at a neighboring table, sitting all alone.

Should I invite him over? No, that’s too early. Tomorrow I will.

As always, there's a lot of kids in the cafeteria today. Besides the hero course, there are also students from the support and business courses. They all come together for lunch, which is probably to help with UA's solidarity.

"This rice is tasty!" Uraraka exclaims, smiling widely as she shovels down her rice.

Izuku nods in agreement before humming. He should probably say something; that's how conversations work. Hm, maybe he should say something about recent events? Something emotional to bring more of a human connection?

He frowns down at his food. "I'm just a little worried about whether or not I can really be class president."

Nailed it.

"You can, Deku!" The brunette encourages, immediately taking some of the rice Izuku silently offers her. He's not very hungry today.

"Worry not, Midoriya, for your grit and decisiveness in a pinch makes you perfectly suited to lead us all." Iida takes a courteous sip of his drink. "That is why I voted for you."

Oh, *wow.* Okay, Izuku actually didn't see that one coming.

Thankfully, Izuku doesn't have to force himself to converse for much longer, as Iida continues to talk about how ambition and suitability are two different matters, and also about how he feels the correct choice had been made in choosing Izuku.

He's flattered, really, but he's also kind of embarrassed. He didn't mean to give them standards. You can't disappoint someone if they don't have high expectations for you anyway.

Iida's word choice prompts Uraraka to ask him if he's a rich kid, which leads the trio into a sweet conversation about the boy's brother. Izuku, who already knows about Ingenium, tunes the conversation out, only listening to minor details that he might be questioned on later. His hands itch to write down the information Iida is giving out about his brother, but he can't. He'll probably be called weird. A stalker, perhaps. And Izuku doesn't want to ruin the careful friendship that's been building up since the entrance exam.

God. He wishes Kacchan would just talk to him. His friend knows

Izuku gets upset when he's not around him for longer than—

It's an alarm that causes everyone to panic suddenly: a shrill, piercing alarm that drives Izuku's nerves to the edge. Oh, yeah, his head *definitely* hates him now.

"Security level three has been broken. All students please evacuate in an orderly fashion."

Level three. Izuku racks his mind for what it means and comes to a conclusion at the same as a student answers Iida's question.

"It means someone's infiltrated the building! Hasn't happened in my three years here!" They turn and rush off into the growing crowd of running students. "Anyway, hurry up and get out of here!"

That's all it takes for everyone else to start scrambling. All of the students in the cafeteria push and shove each other to get to the exit first, some of them even screaming while they're doing it. Izuku stays in his seat, hands clenching the fabric of his pants as everyone squeezes past him. Iida and Uraraka have been separated from him, so he forces himself to stand on the table to check for a better explanation.

And said explanation is there—right at the window. A large sea of reporters, most of them with faces Izuku can recognize from this morning, is pressing forward on the front lawn, trying to get to the school itself.

Now Izuku is confused. He knows the alarm system well because of his recent surfings of UA's files and online systems. The alarm wouldn't have gone off for a press breach, no matter the size or animosity of the group. Hell, the press wouldn't have gotten in anyway without outside intervention.

Izuku gazes longingly at the white rice that had fallen to the floor amidst the chaos and watches as teenagers are dragged further into the mob of students. He stands there for a moment, dazed, mind running a mile a second. His stomach is coiled tightly all of a sudden. Something is *wrong.*

He pushes in the opposite direction of the bumbling students and heads for the roof. If it really is a breach, then it had to begin at the front gate. That's the only entrance and exit to the school grounds.

UA is quite high up, and Izuku shivers as a cold breeze passes by the

moment he steps onto the roof. He digs inside the pockets he'd sewn into the inside of his school jacket and pulls out AINA. He doesn't keep the AI on his wrist anymore in case anyone happens to see it and make the connection to Rabbit. Especially Aizawa. He'd be the first one to do so.

He double taps the screen and pops in an earbud. "Hey, AINA, can you zoom in on the fence over there, please? And record it while you're at it."

"Of course, Izuku. Welcome back."

He aims the screen at the gate and allows the AI to do the rest. The camera zooms in on a few figures standing near the entrance, herding the press back outside. Izuku recognizes Aizawa and a couple more teachers—even Yamada. This means that this is serious, much more serious than he previously thought.

But at the moment, Izuku is more focused on the gate itself. It's partially disintegrated, the entirety of the concrete having been reduced to a pile of dust on the ground, almost like it decayed like a rotting plant.

Decay. It *decayed.*

Izuku feels sick. There's a good chance he's about to throw up the rice he just ate. Because he *knows* what could have caused this. UA's security gate is made out of very thick, nearly indestructible concrete and metal. It couldn't have been a normal machine or chemical that caused this degree of damage in such little time. This is the result of a quirk.

A very powerful quirk.

He lets out a shaky breath, tucking the device back into his pocket. "I'm going to mute you now. Please analyze that footage when you can."

Another affirmative from his AI and then Izuku's jogging back to the cafeteria with an added urgency to his stride. The alarm told them that it was a breach, and the students all assumed it to be from the press, but Izuku doesn't think that's the entire truth.

He pushes back to where he was sitting before the alarm, only to see Iida up ahead suddenly starting to float into the air and spin toward the exit, no doubt a result of Uraraka's quirk. He must be aiming to try

and calm the students down.

“Everyone!” He commands, voice loud and precise. “Everything is fine! It’s just the press!”

It’s not, Izuku thinks, but he doesn’t dare say that when the entire cafeteria has gone dead silent. Iida’s words are apparently doing the trick, as everyone starts to settle down as the boy continues.

“There’s nothing to panic about, we’re fine! This is UA; behave in a way befitting to this institution!”

Izuku is too strung up to pay attention to the comforting words. They’re fake, as most everything is in his life nowadays. The meaning of what just happened is slowly starting to seep into his skin, and the panic comes with it in waves.

Does he know I’m here? Is that why he did that? As a warning? Or was it a distraction? He could be in this school at this very moment and we wouldn’t even know.

Fuck. What is he supposed to do? Izuku doesn’t know if he should tell anyone about his musings, as he could very well be overreacting. There's no proof that it's who Izuku thinks it is. He could be wrong. He knows all about Shigaraki Tomura, sure, but is this *really* him? The disintegrated gate looks like his work. And that’s one hundred percent something that he’d do, too. So it’s possible.

The staff has probably already figured out that it’s not a simple press break-in. They’re probably scouring for any clues or information they can get their hands on, and Izuku *has* that information. He could give it to them. All of it.

But that’s dangerous. He’d be questioned as to how he knows this, and also as to why he hasn’t said anything before. Hm. It’d be best for Izuku to deliver a packet or something as Rabbit after school, just as a tip or something. Being a vigilante with a lot of connections will give him an excuse if people end up asking why he knows certain things.

A clear of the throat. Izuku jolts as he realizes that Yaoyorozu is staring at him. Oh. So is the entire class. He’s in front of the classroom now. He doesn’t remember getting here.

“Oh, yes! We’d, uh, like to choose the other student council members, but before that…” He pauses, not really for dramatic effect, more for him to gather his scrambled thoughts. “I believe that Iida is better

suited to be class president."

The boy in question looks shocked at the admission, as does everyone else. Izuku hurries to continue before they can try and change his mind.

"He led everyone well in that crisis during lunch, so I think he's the correct choice for this job." He dips his head and starts back toward his seat, giving what he hopes is a soft smile in Iida's direction.

Kirishima is the first to break the silence with his agreement. "That sounds good! Iida really showed his stuff back in the cafeteria!" He glances at Izuku quickly. "Not that I've got anything against Midoriya!"

"He was like a beacon pointing to the emergency exit," Kaminari says just as enthusiastically.

The rest of the class starts to add in their approval as well, and Izuku notes how Aizawa starts to slurp on another jelly pouch. This one looks to be apple-flavored. "Whatever," the teacher grumbles. "Just get on with it. This is a waste of time."

Izuku is relieved when Iida finally accepts the position. The green-haired boy doesn't think he could've handled another thing on his plate.

Not now that he has a mystery to solve.

Izuku isn't nearly as excited about the trip to the USJ as he should've been. Paralyzing fear and exhaustion does that to you, he guesses. The coffee from this morning is wearing off, so now he's experiencing a withdrawal.

Hopefully it won't affect his performance.

Rescue training is promising, and Izuku isn't exactly *not* looking forward to it, he's just nonchalant about it.

“You wore your gym clothes, Deku? Where’s your costume?”

Izuku pales, knowing that Kacchan is within earshot as he answers Uraraka’s question. “It didn’t make it through battle training in one piece. I just have to wait until the support company is finished with it.”

The students had been given the choice of whether or not to wear their costumes, and most of Izuku’s classmates had. The boy probably would’ve too under different circumstances.

The bus ride to the USJ is nice, though Iida is obviously still upset about the seats not allowing the students to fill them up in an orderly fashion.

Izuku sits next to Asui and Satou, bummed at not being able to be with Kacchan. He shakes off the hurt, though. They’ll have their friendship fixed in a couple of days at most.

“I generally say what’s on my mind, Midoriya,” Asui starts abruptly.

Izuku frowns. “Oh? What is it, Asui?”

“Call me Tsuyu.” She doesn’t even hesitate. “Your quirk largely resembles All Might’s.”

Hm. The fact that she even pointed that out speaks volumes about her attention to detail. Izuku makes sure to keep his face carefully blank, but luckily, Kirishima comes to his defense.

“Hold up, Tsuyu. All Might doesn’t get hurt, though.” He tips his head. “They’re already different in that way.”

I fucking owe you my life you spiky cinnamon roll.

Kirishima continues with a sort of awe in his voice. “But that sort of simple strength enhancement is awesome! You can do a lot of cool stuff with it! Not like my Hardening; I’m good in a fight, but it’s real boring.”

Now that, Izuku can understand, but that doesn’t stop him from furrowing his brows. “I think that’s pretty neat actually. Your quirk’s more than enough if you wanna go pro.”

“Pro,” another student repeats. “But don’t forget that heroes also have to worry about popular appeal.”

Aoyama rests his chin on both palms. “My naval laser is both strong and cool. Perfect for a hero.”

“As long as you don’t blow up your own stomach!” Mina teases, and *ouch.*

The look the pink-skinned girl gets in return makes Izuku think of that one frog meme he’d seen a while back.

“You wanna talk strong and cool? That’d be Todoroki and Bakugou.”

Oh, fuck, here we go.

“But Bakugou’s so unhinged,” Tsuyu counters. “He’d never be popular.”

The blond, who’s been eavesdropping on their conversation this entire time, leaps to his feet, disturbing Jirou beside him. “What’d you say, frog-face?”

“See?” The girl points out, unfazed.

Kaminari smirks at the explosive teen. “We’ve only barely started socializing and already you’ve made it abundantly clear to us the unpleasantness of your steamed turd of a personality.”

Izuku can’t stop the laugh from escaping him this time, because holy *shit!* It’s ironic to think that Kacchan’s the one getting bullied now. The boy shuts up immediately when his friend turns his fiery gaze upon him.

That’s right. They’re not friends right now, which means Izuku can’t laugh at any of those jokes.

“Yeah, okay, Mr. Vocabulary, how ‘bout I pound you?”

Izuku really wishes he could make a dirty joke right now.

“We’re here.” Aizawa cuts in with a pointed glare, saving Izuku from his inner turmoil. “Look sharp now.”

It turns out that the USJ is even better looking than the pictures. Izuku knows what the simulation joint does, and also what different zones it houses, so it’s no surprise how big it is. The other students obviously don’t think so.

“Woah!”

“Is this Universal Studios Japan?”

Izuku sighs to himself, because don’t they all wish that?

Thirteen is waiting for them just out by the steps. “There’s the flood zone, landslide zone, conflagration zone, etcetera. Every disaster and accident you can imagine. I built this facility myself, and I call it the *Unforeseen Simulation Joint!”*

The hero before them specializes in rescue scenarios because of their quirk capabilities. It’s no wonder they built the USJ.

Uraraka squeals from beside Izuku. “Ooh, I love Thirteen!”

Izuku listens to his friend excitedly talk about how she used to admire Thirteen a lot as a kid, and Izuku hums along when needed. His attention is focused on Aizawa, though, as their homeroom teacher is seemingly asking the rescue hero a question.

The boy knows exactly what when he sees the three fingers Thirteen puts up. All Might already used up his time for today? That would explain why he’s not here.

“Before we get started,” Thirteen says, starting to count on their gloved fingers. “I have one or two points. Or three. Or four.”

A lot of points, then.

“As I’m sure many of you are aware, my quirk is called Black Hole. It can suck in and tear apart anything.”

“And you’ve used it to save people in all sorts of disasters,” Izuku adds, starting to get affected by Uraraka’s bouncing.

“Indeed. However, my quirk could easily kill.” Their voice turns a little more somber. “I’ve no doubt there are some among you with similar abilities. In this class, you will learn how to utilize your quirks to save lives.”

The group is silent now, each looking down at their own hands and wondering what those words could mean, and if they even hold any merit. Izuku doesn’t need to think about it. He knows it’s true for himself, even disregarding One for All and *Boost.*

In a superpowered society, the use of quirks is heavily restricted and monitored. It may seem to anyone on the outside that this system is a

stable one, but it's hard to forget that it only takes one wrong move with an uncontrollable quirk for people to die.

Izuku is all too aware of that.

"Your powers are not meant to inflict harm," Thirteen finishes. "I hope you leave here today with an understanding that you're meant to *help* people."

For the second time that day, the class erupts, clapping and cheering at the incredible speech. Izuku is kind of impressed, too. It'd been moving for everyone there, so the thing that happens next is kind of ironic.

It's only fitting that it's when Aizawa starts to speak that it happens.

His head suddenly explodes in pain, and not even the heavy pills in his body can stop him from stumbling slightly, palm coming up to smack the side of his head. Fuck.

Uraraka gives him a concerned look, opening her mouth to ask what's wrong, but Aizawa beats her to it. "Midoriya?"

And then the boy suddenly feels them. The increase in the number of quirks and the power all around him. There must be a hundred or more of them at least, which means there are *a hundred or more people attached with said quirks.*

His eyes snap forward, and the sight far below him is enough to have the boy swallowing back the white rice creeping up his throat.

Purple mist. Familiar hands. A hundred thirsty criminals here for bloodshed. A large, muscular creature that looms over the others.

"Sensei," he chokes.

The hero follows his gaze, and by now the class is talking loudly amongst themselves, asking if this is a test or one of their simulations.

But Izuku knows better. He's starting to figure out why he'd woken up this morning feeling off, as if the world had been knocked off its kilter and caused everything to have a certain edge to it.

The gate had been a warning after all.

Chapter End Notes

the deepthroating the mic scene was inspired by this absolute gem on YouTube

that Rabbit and Eraserhead scene inspired by this comic on tumblr!!

e

might have been

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aizawa is the first to move, as always. That's one of the many things Izuku admires about the hero; he doesn't hesitate. He's always the first to move and the first to save. It's something that Izuku has come to rely on during their patrols. It's steady, concrete, and so Izuku isn't surprised when his teacher slides on his goggles and readies himself.

"Huddle up and don't move!" Aizawa orders, throwing an arm out. "Thirteen, protect the students!"

Izuku's ears start to ring at the sudden overload of energy, and he's faintly aware of Uraraka saying something from beside him, but he can only see her mouth moving from the corner of his vision. He's more focused on the ground far below, at where the purple mist is growing larger, allowing more criminals to step through.

He was wrong. There's a *lot* more than a hundred. Izuku can count close to *two* hundred, and that's only the ones his eyes can see. A few of them are as large as All Might due to what look likes their mutation quirks, but others are small and lanky, probably with emitter type powers. Those people are more dangerous, though, as now Izuku has to *guess* what their powers are.

Kirishima has stepped forward by the time Izuku manages to shake himself from his panic. "What the heck's that? More battle robots? Like during the entrance exam?"

No, but everything would be so much better that way. He digs his nails into his palms hard enough to draw blood, body trembling now as he forces himself to breathe. He has to focus. This isn't the time for a meltdown. He can't afford to be weak little Izuku right now. He has to improvise.

But then that familiar light blue hair catches his attention once more and Izuku is stumbling back on instinct, hiding from view. His mouth goes dry, as if the ability to swallow his own spit has been stripped from him, and it leaves him struggling to even breathe properly.

His first time seeing Tomura—no, *Shigaraki,* in four years, and this is his response. It's pathetic, but it's not at all surprising.

Someone's looking at him now. Izuku can feel the slight burn at the back of his neck.

He turns his head and makes eye contact with Kacchan, who's staring at him across the platform with an unreadable expression. There might be a question in those eyes, Izuku thinks, but the boy is too far out of it to really check.

Aizawa curses as more of the students try to get a better look. They obviously haven't sensed the urgency in the situation yet. "Don't move! Those are real villains!"

The mist is swirling around now, revealing glowing yellow eyes that garner everyone's attention. "Thirteen and Eraserhead, is it?" The voice is a rumble, and Izuku nearly chokes as the words resonate up the stairs. He hasn't heard Kurogiri in a long, long time. "According to the staff schedule I received, All Might is supposed to be here."

All Might. They're here for All Might, not Izuku, which leaves the boy to wonder if they even know he's here.

They didn't come for me?

"Of course that whole incident today was the doing of you louts," Aizawa hisses, having already connected the villains to the gate situation; another thing Izuku admires about Eraserhead—his ability to draw patterns and connections between the most unusual things.

But back to the matter at hand.

Shigaraki seems to be the leader in this attack, that much is clear. It's a shocking turn of events, as Kurogiri used to be the one calling the shots under All for One's command, but now it seems that Shigaraki has taken on that role.

The very role Izuku would have been forced into had he stayed.

"Where is he...?" Shigaraki starts, sounding even more crazed than Izuku remembers. "We've come all this way and brought so many playmates. All Might, the Symbol of Peace... is he here?" A pause, and then he tips his head back in thought, the villains spreading out around him. "I wonder if some dead kids will bring him here?"

Izuku's blood runs cold, and his classmates stiffen, the weight of the situation suddenly crashing down onto their shoulders. Aizawa moves to stand at the top of the stairs, hands gripping his capture weapon.

He's going to fight them by himself. He's going to hold them off. The realization sends an icy wave of dread running down Izuku's spine.

The boy can only stay where he is and watch, feet glued to the floor. A sweaty hand lands on his shoulder, and a gruff voice tickles the skin near his ear. "Deku."

Izuku doesn't register it at first. He's still reeling, mind going a million miles per hour as he tries to figure out what the *fuck* he's supposed to do. Is Shigaraki really just here for All Might? Is that why he brought that—that *creature* that's standing next to him? And does All for One even know about this? He scratches that last part out immediately. Of course he knows; he knows everything. He can see and hear what others can't, which leads Izuku to believe that he must've orchestrated this invasion himself. There's no way he *doesn't* know.

"That's him?" Kacchan asks roughly, eyes fixed on the scene far below.

Izuku just nods, too terrified to even question why Kacchan's talking to him all of a sudden when just five minutes ago he was glaring daggers at him. His friend has never seen Shigaraki or Kurogiri before, but Izuku has talked about them a few times before. It would make sense for Kacchan to make that connection, especially with how Izuku is acting.

"Villains?" A student asks shakily. It sounds like Mineta. "No way! What villains would be dumb enough to sneak into a school for heroes?"

The kind Izuku knows. The kind the rest of the class knows now, too, so it seems.

Izuku is faintly aware of Yaoyorozu talking quickly with Thirteen, asking the hero if there are any alarms for situations like this one. And of *course* there are—it's UA, for god's sake. The school has money out the ass, and so of course it's going to have security measures. Which can only mean that someone's quirk is blocking any transmissions from here to the main building. That's why none of the alarms are sounding.

If they were working they would've sounded the very moment Kurogiri's portal appeared.

The boy jolts suddenly. Are there villains at the main building as well? He can't sense anything out of the ordinary past this building, but

there's always a possibility he's wrong. And that would be *terrible,* because that means there'll be no chance of backup arriving even if they managed to get the word out in the first place.

The USJ is far from campus. Shigaraki has picked a place where there'd be few people around, so it's obvious that Izuku's brother isn't as stupid as he used to be. He must have an objective, because this isn't some uncoordinated surprise attack—this is an ambush.

They were waiting for them. For All Might specifically. And for what? To kill him?

Todoroki seems to be on the same train of thought, as he voices these musings aloud just as Aizawa seems to make up his mind.

"Thirteen, begin evacuation! Try calling the school! One of these villains must be jamming the sensors." The hero turns to face the crowd of students. "Kaminari. Try using your quirk to signal for help. There's a good chance that one of their electric-types is causing the interference."

The blond nods weakly. "Got it!"

And then Aizawa is moving, strips of his capture weapon already floating high above his head in preparation, and Izuku has seen and been in so many fights with the man that he *knows* what's about to happen next. He knows what the hero is going to do to those criminals; he knows that he'll be okay, and yet Izuku can't help but reach out anyway.

"Sensei...!" Izuku blurts, trailing off when he realizes that there's really nothing for him to say. He trusts Aizawa's capabilities. He knows his teacher isn't incapable, but the worry that overtakes him at the idea of Aizawa going down there alone is like hot acid burning through his skin.

Aizawa senses his hesitance and shakes his head once before turning away. "No good hero is a one-trick pony."

Oh. That's the same line he told Izuku once during one of their patrols, back when the boy had asked him why he decided to use a capture scarf as a support item. At that time, his answer had been a mere explanation, but now it sounds more like a reassurance. Like a *worry about yourself and the others, I'll be fine.*

And Izuku doesn't doubt it, but his mind is still screaming at him to do

something. Aizawa leaps down the stairs as a distraction, throwing a quick *Thirteen, take care of them!* over his shoulder, so Izuku doesn't have time to dwell on his thoughts.

The villains are obviously taken aback when they see the pro hero flying toward them. Aizawa doesn't look like much from an outsider's perspective, that much is true. He still looks like that homeless probably-a-murderer in Izuku's mind from the first time they saw each other, so it's understandable why the villains underestimate him at first.

Aizawa has no problem taking down the first two through sheer force and power alone. The criminals don't expect their quirks to be gone so suddenly, and the pro hero uses the shock factor to his advantage as he skillfully works through them five at a time.

(And holy *shit.* Izuku is amazed every time when he watches the hero fight. Of course he can hold his own even while being outnumbered.)

Izuku drags his eyes away to see Kurogiri and Shigaraki conversing with each other, the handsy man looking irritated at the sight of Aizawa—*Eraserhead,* now, fighting his numbers with ease. His hatred toward heroes has never been a secret, so Izuku can kind of guess what his brother is thinking right now.

Ordinary villains don't stand a chance against pros, especially pros like Eraserhead. The man's skill and experience is good for Izuku and the rest of the class, but bad for the villains.

"This is no time for internal analysis!" Iida shouts, chopping the air frantically as he tries to get Izuku's attention. Oh. Izuku's the only one by the ledge now, Kacchan having been dragged back already. "Hurry up and evacuate!"

What? Izuku blinks stupidly. Evacuation for himself is not on the table. Whether or not Shigaraki is there for him specifically doesn't matter, what matters is that Izuku knows more about the two main villains than anyone else here. He is, for lack of a better term, important.

A word he never thought he'd ever use for himself.

Izuku can't allow himself to leave, not now. Not until this entire shitshow is over and everyone is safe. And what about that *creature?* He's never seen them look like that before.

They've never been so big.

His mind explodes once again, something sharp digging into the back of his skull. He turns around immediately, locking eyes with vibrant yellow eyes framed by purple mist. Hm. Family reunion time, eh?

"I won't allow that," Kurogiri states simply, contradicting Iida's previous words. The villain looms over them, slowly expanding to surround the group of students. He doesn't bother to acknowledge Izuku whatsoever. "Greetings. We are the League of Villains." The mist parts to reveal his signature neckpiece, and Izuku notices that it looks different than the last time he saw it. It must've been upgraded. "Forgive our audacity, but we've come here to UA High School—this bastion of heroism, to end the life of All Might, the Symbol of Peace."

Straight and to the point. Some things never change. Izuku feels a hot surge of anger rush through him now that he's pushed his nerves and fear to the back of his mind. He has a job to do now.

Think of this as just another mission, he thinks. Except instead of like busting a drug deal, this is more like a crossover between *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and *John Wick,* with the added threat of his entire class and two teachers being brutally murdered. Yep. Definitely a normal mission for him.

He's not Rabbit right now, though, and yet he doesn't quite feel like Izuku either. He's in a weird in-between zone, and by the time he's done dissociating, Kurogiri is almost finished talking.

"My role remains unchanged," he says, his mist darkening slightly in what Izuku can identity as him about to activate his quirk. The void wraps all the way around them, but before they can be teleported to who knows where, Kacchan and Kirishima are rushing at him.

And *fuck* does that make Izuku almost have a heart attack right then and there. It's not that he doesn't trust the two of them, it's just that they don't know what Kurogiri is capable of. They're acting rashly!

The two of them attack in tandem, Kirishima aiming a hardened kick at Kurogiri and Bakugou shooting out an explosion. The blond aims at the collar; a good choice, really, seeing as that's one of Kurogiri's few weaknesses. It's the only visible spot you can go for when fighting him.

Izuku knows that from many, many training sessions with him.

“Not if we end you first!” Kirishima yells, skidding to a halt when he lands back on the ground. “Betcha didn’t see that coming!”

Kurogiri wavers slightly. “That was close. Yes. Students though you may be, you are the best of the best.”

Sure, but we’re about to be dead *students soon.*

“No, get back! Both of you!” Thirteen says, obviously on the same level of thinking. The rescue hero positions themself in front of the students and holds up an arm.

Kurogiri is faster, though, and the mist suddenly tightens around the hero and sucks them in. Izuku can barely see anymore, but he can hear the villain’s words clear enough: “Go. Writhe in torment until you breathe your last.”

A few yelps and cries sound out from around him, and Izuku feels the powers around him starting to decrease. Fuck! He’s teleporting the students. He’s sectioning them off in twos and threes. Oh god. Izuku has a feeling he knows what the plan is.

He has to keep us occupied so we can’t escape, even if that means teleporting us farther inside the building.

Izuku is ready for it when his own portal opens up right beside him, ready to scoop him up—a rookie mistake. Kurogiri should know better. Under-the-feet attacks used to be his go-to option while fighting against the boy. That strategy is the only one that would almost always work.

He dodges it in the blink of an eye, trying to make his way out of the mist. He dances around the other openings, wildly glancing around to see if he can get close enough to yank one of his friends out of the way. But he can only see a few feet in front of his face, and all too soon Izuku is left with just a few other students in the blink of an eye. The mist disappears, going back towards Kurogiri.

There’s quite a few others spread out around him; Izuku can see Iida, Uraraka, Mina, Shoji, Satou, and evening Sero off to the side. Thirteen is running for them, having been left as well. Kurogiri either left them purposely or couldn’t manage to get them in his portal.

It’s more than likely the second. Kuro needs to keep his eyes on them.

Izuku shifts on his feet. He should tell them his knowledge, he doesn’t

care about the consequences he might face now that it's life or death for everyone here. He knows all about Kurogiri and Shigaraki—he can tell them. *Should* have told them right after the gate incident.

But then he hears the mist swirling around again, ready for a second try at splitting them all up, and he forces himself to move. *Aim for the neckpiece. Just like in training.*

His legs burn as he leaps at his former caretaker, ignoring the calls of his friends behind him. He has his foot reared back, ready to kick the piece of heavy metal that's keeping Kurogiri's body hidden, eyes alight in determination.

Their gazes lock, and Izuku really wishes he could read the villain's expression. It's nearly impossible to do so in general, given by the lack of a face, but now more than ever it seems to be an issue.

Damn you.

The tip of Izuku's shoe is a mere inch from touching the metal when the mist appears before him once again and swallows him whole. And just like that he's dropped onto the stairs leading down to the plaza. He tumbles down the last few steps, cursing himself. He just left his friends alone to deal with him.

At least Thirteen is there. The pro hero should be able to keep them relatively safe.

He scrambles to his feet, taking a look around. He was dropped in the middle of the fight, it seems. Eraserhead is not too far off, still fighting the villains. His movements are sluggish now, as he's obviously tired, but he's still getting the job done. He's like a fish swimming upstream, taking down any obstacles in his way on his journey to get to Shigaraki.

The large creature is still standing by Izuku's brother, barely moving with the exception of its heavy breathing. Is it a human? No, the exposed brain says otherwise. This is a *pet.* He was made.

And that means… No. They couldn't have. They… he made it? He perfected them?

Izuku recalls All for One mentioning something about how the progress of his newest projects were going, back before Izuku escaped that dreadful facility. He remembers dark basements filled with monsters, shadows with eyes in them, and the boy starts to shake.

Is this a newer, repaired version of one of those *projects?*

God, he really wishes he hadn't left AINA in his backpack after changing into his gym uniform. She could've helped a lot, even if he kept her hidden inside his pocket.

The boy briefly wonders why Kurogiri dropped him here, right by Shigaraki. Was it on purpose, or was it a decision made in a blind panic to keep him from getting the collar off?

Izuku slaps himself from him thoughts and gradually slips into his attack mode. He can worry and scream about this all later, but for now he has to deal with things one step at a time.

The only thing he can do is help his teacher fight now that he's here. There are a ton of villains in the plaza, and probably a lot more all spread out in the various zones. He has to stay out of sight as well, though, so he starts by taking down the villains on the outskirts of the area—as far away from Shigaraki as possible. He'll only be a distraction to Eraserhead if he suddenly pops up in the middle of it, and Shigaraki will probably throw a tantrum once he sees him—unless they do actually know he's here. It would be very surprising, however, as Izuku his still under the impression that his brother would sell him out immediately, even if he didn't actually see him. But he's said nothing of the sort yet.

The boy hikes up a leg and grabs the emergency knife from his boot, thinking absentmindedly that he'll have to make up an excuse later for having it if he gets caught. Students aren't allowed to have undocumented support weapons, after all, especially *knives.* But he hopes that this counts as an emergency.

Izuku slowly works his way to the middle of the jumble of villains, ignoring the shocked calls from the lowlife criminals. Apparently he's not supposed to be this skilled, not at his young age. Which is kind of ageist.

The boy darts in and smashes one of the criminals to the ground, simultaneously deflecting a knife meant for his teacher, who does a double take upon seeing him. "Midoriya! What are you—?"

"Looked like you needed some help!" He cuts him off, albeit apologetically. He ducks a mutant's thin tail and sends the man barreling into another. "I wasn't going to leave you, sensei!"

"You should not be here," he hisses, sounding pissed. Oh well. Izuku

can deal with that later, if there even is a later for them.

“The mist guy has a teleportation quirk that works as a portal,” Izuku continues as if the man never spoke. “Very dangerous.”

A muffled curse. Izuku slices the straps of someone’s leather whip and grabs hold of the end piece, jerking them forward. He moves out of the way in time for Eraserhead to deal the finishing blow, and then they’re suddenly back-to-back. They move around each other like that, falling back into that familiar pattern.

Izuku can only pray that Eraserhead is too preoccupied to wonder *why* they’re fighting together so fluently.

“Five-point disintegration,” the boy starts again. “That’s what Handy Man over there has. Don’t let him touch you!”

“He’s the one who damaged the gate, then,” Eraserhead says, more to himself than anything. But then he looks suddenly bewildered. “How do you—”

“A lucky guess. I’m going to help draw them to the plaza! The more here, the more we have accounted for. Besides, it’ll take attention away from the other students!”

He also wants to get out of Shigaraki’s eyesight.

Eraserhead flashes him another warning look. “No. You need to get back!”

Izuku isn’t sorry at all. Of course the hero can more than hold his own out here, but it’s too much for him. He knew that, too, and yet he jumped in anyway to protect the students. If Izuku can do anything to help him like how he’s helping them, he won’t hesitate to do it.

The boy doesn’t bother replying before zipping through the crowd and dragging some of the nearest criminals along with him. He can draw them all to one place, and if he makes a big enough commotion, all of the others will follow suit. It’ll be less for the other students to deal with, too.

“Midoriya—!” Eraserhead shouts, but the boy pretends he doesn’t hear him.

He can at least help lighten the load until backup arrives. Hopefully Iida or somebody can escape Kurogiri and get help. It’s most likely

that whoever is messing with the system has hidden themselves, as the alarms haven't turned on even with Eraserhead nullifying nearly everyone's quirks. If a student can get outside, they should be able to contact the school quickly. Or at least run to the main building. Villains wouldn't be able to follow because the alarms only work inside the building. They'd be found out the moment they stepped outside.

Izuku continues his separate brawl, and he swears he only looks away for a *moment* when it happens.

"Twenty-four seconds."

Oh. Fuck.

Izuku turns, and from his place all the way across the plaza, he can see Shigaraki running at Eraserhead. The hero was able to create a pathway to the villain since Izuku has drawn most of the other criminals back. *But that wasn't supposed to be the goddamn point! He's supposed to keep his distance, not go straight for him! Screw it all!*

"So, you're the boss?" Eraserhead calls, and Izuku's breath shudders.

"Twenty-three." Shigaraki grabs the end of the hero's scarf between his fingers. "Twenty seconds."

Eraserhead moves past the creature, who's merely standing there like a doll waiting for orders, and dives at the younger man.

"Seventeen."

The hero yanks on his end of the capture weapon and drives his elbow directly into the villain's stomach.

Izuku can't hear past the ringing in his ears, but he can see his brother's mouth moving, and he has a vague idea what he's saying.

He's figured it out. The time limit. It's hard to tell when he's fighting, but Eraserhead's hair falls down when he deactivates his quirk—so whenever he blinks. Every time he finishes a big move his max duration gets shorter. That explains why Shigaraki was counting.

He's definitely not as dumb as he used to be. Izuku isn't sure what to think of that new info.

But then Izuku can see the dust floating in the air, and it's only then

that he realizes that Shigaraki grabbed onto Eraserhead's elbow before he could pull away, the skin and muscle being disintegrated instantly.

Izuku wants to throw up and scream at the same time, but he settles on punching his current victim with a lot more force than necessary because *I fucking told you to keep your distance!*

Eraserhead takes it in stride and shoves the young villain away, though Izuku can spot the dawning horror and realization on his face as he sees Shigaraki's quirk in action.

Two more villains lunge at the hero to distract him, and Izuku can tell his teacher is slowing down even more. The man barely dodges a stab to the shoulder, and he ends up just shoving both criminals back for a second to right himself.

Izuku is sliced in the cheek with a katana, and he parries the next blow before easily swiping the criminal's legs out from under her and throwing his dagger into the chest of her partner. He *pulls* the dude forward and jabs his knee in the center of his face, knocking him out cold. He grips his knife even tighter and tries to make his way back to the center, back to Eraserhead. Because there's that feeling again, that something wrong is happening. That the world is turning upside-down once more.

He gets close enough to hear the tail end of Shigaraki's monologue. "So cool. So cool. But by the way, hero," his grin turns sickening, "I'm not the boss here."

What? Izuku grits his teeth. What is he talking about? It can't be one of those low level thugs.

The creature moves with breathtaking speed. The light reflects off of its oily black skin as it grabs onto a thrashing Eraserhead and lifts him up with one meaty hand. A hand that could crush skulls with ease, Izuku knows.

The boy is fighting with more vigor now, trying to avoid the villains crowding him this time so he can get to his teacher, so he can help.

And then the Nomu is smashing Eraserhead into the ground at breakneck speed, the sick snap of bone sounding clearly through the air before the crack of the concrete makes itself known. Large hands pound down on the man's arms and elbows.

Once. Twice.

The hero is smashed further into the ground with every hit, and even this far away, Izuku can see the blood trickling down his face and pooling around him.

It's dark and shiny. Thick like sludge.

Izuku really does almost vomit this time, as the screams that's leaving Eraserhead's mouth causes something ugly to churn in his stomach. He feels suddenly cold, the knife in his hand a steady heat as he stands there, glued to the ground yet again, as the creature raises its meaty arms, ready to hit Eraserhead for the third time—ready to kill him, it looks, as the hit is directed at his head. The teacher is barely moving.

"Meet the anti-symbol of peace," Shigaraki says snidely. "The bio-engineered *Nomu."*

Nomu. A name to go with the monster that used to plague Izuku's living nightmares back then. It sounds fitting.

Instead of dealing a finishing blow, the creature lifts the hero's head off the ground and pauses for a moment, obviously waiting for the final command before it slams him face-first into the ground; a brutal move. And that's when Izuku starts running.

There are only a few criminals remaining around him, and even they have already backed off, eyes wide now that they are fully witnessing the Nomu's destructive power. Which means there's nobody to stop him as Izuku practically flies towards the anti-symbol of peace.

Time always seems to move faster when it's running out. To others, it seems that Izuku simply reappears in front of the creature, arm raised with red lightning crackling along his skin, but to Izuku the milliseconds between the point of contact ticks on for hours.

The Nomu is fast, but only artificially so. It drops Eraserhead with a thud and pivots, its own fist coming up to meet Izuku's before the boy can land the hit to its face. And the sheer *shock* that runs through him when their fists meet is enough to have Izuku yelping as he's blown backwards, the wind roaring in his ears.

And the Nomu barely stumbles.

Izuku hits the ground hard, a round of blood leaving him from his mouth and nose. He coughs it out wetly, pushing himself to rest on his knees as he stares up at the Nomu, who's still standing over Eraserhead, wild eyes transfixed on the boy like a lion with its prey.

Waiting. Always waiting. It can't think for itself.

Izuku's arm is burning now, and he chances a glance down to find it perfectly intact. So it's not even fractured, which is good considering he still has that stupid ring on.

The Nomu doesn't make another move. It doesn't even look fazed from Izuku's fifteen percent punch. *Shock absorption, perhaps? It's bio-engineered, so it could have multiple quirks like me. This is gonna make things a hell of a lot harder, but also a hell of a lot more enjoyable since I can't get hurt from using One for All directly.*

Izuku stands up and walks towards the creature, steps slow and purposeful. He needs to distract it—do anything that'll make sure it won't hit the pro hero beneath him even one more time.

The boy really hopes Eraserhead is unconscious at this point; he can feel the man's quirk dimming ever so slightly. He hasn't even lifted up his head yet.

"This is my replacement?" Izuku moves a few more yards so he's standing in front of his limp teacher, tense, in case the Nomu decides to go again. "I have to say, I'm a little disappointed."

Shigaraki scratches at his neck in agitation. It seems Izuku's brother never did get rid of that tic of his. "You. You're not supposed to be here."

Izuku grits his teeth, fists clenching. "Neither are you, Crusty Lips. Now that we're done stating the obvious, how about you tell me what kind of fucking power that thing has."

He points at the Nomu, the mindless creature that almost killed Eraserhead. His teacher and mentor. One of the only adults who's ever showed Izuku any care. He could've been gone. Just like that. That could still happen, really. It's hard to tell what's going on at this point.

"The Nomu?" Shigaraki sounds like he's grinning behind the hand on his face. "He's my new sidekick." He rolls his head around sensually. "Sensei gave it to me as a pet. He's a high level, you see."

Izuku scoffs, trying to keep his anger at bay. "He? That thing is a monster. Not a person."

"Well, I guess that makes sense." There's a manic uptilt to his lips. "He

would've been you."

Izuku reels back in disgust, even as he registers that he himself just joked about that. He just didn't expect that to be true.

That Nomu is a mindless, *soulless* creature. How could they? How could they make something like this?

Shivers go down Izuku's spine. *It really is like a little plaything. And that would've been me if I didn't leave when I did.*

"Hey, Nomu!" He waves at it, as if to get its attention, but it doesn't even blink.

"He only answers to me," Shigaraki says. "He listens to *my* orders."

So, in other words, he's just here to protect you and kill All Might. Like an attack dog.

"Now, how did you manage to cheat your way into this place?" His brother continues, eyes sharpening with interest. His fingers are twitching. Shigaraki is positively *itching* to hurt his brother. "I doubt these little heroes know what you are, right?"

Ignore him. Ignore him. Ignore him—

Familiar purple mist swirls behind his brother, and Kurogiri manifests from it. "Tomura," the villain starts.

"Kurogiri. Is Thirteen dead?"

"Incapacitated," he states, sending a rush of relief through Izuku. "But there were some students I couldn't warp away, and one of them escaped to the main building."

Iida. Or maybe Kaminari.

Shigaraki turns to him and starts to laugh lowly, a dangerous sound. "Oh?" The scratching intensifies, almost to the point of blood. Izuku cringes at the sight. "Kurogiri... I'd turn you to dust if you weren't our ticket out of here."

The boy doesn't doubt it. His brother has never been as close to the warp villain as Izuku was. As if sensing his thoughts, Kurogiri shifts his yellow eyes to look at him.

"Izuku." The villain tips his shadowy head. "We were not informed of

your attendance today."

So All for One kept this from them, as Izuku knows that the man must have been aware. Is he testing him? Trying to see what he'll do? Or is he testing Shigaraki? It could be both, in all honesty.

"This is a surprise on both sides then," Izuku mutters.

Shigaraki doesn't seem to care at the implications of this, though, as he's still scratching at his neck. "We won't stand a chance against dozens of pros. It's game over. It's game over *for now."* He clenches his hand into a fist. "We're leaving."

And—what? No. That's not right. Can't be right. To go through all of this trouble, only to leave at the mere mention of backup arriving? It's unusual. It's not like his brother to give up so easily.

So when Shigaraki twists his head, Izuku isn't really surprised at the words that leave him. "But before that... I think we should do some damage here. Leaving some dead kids behind should wound the pride of the Symbol of Peace a little bit, at least." His older brother turns, crazed eyes locking onto Izuku's. "And I think we should start with *you."*

The blood is rushing through his ears now, so he doesn't quite hear the command given to the Nomu, but it's not that hard to imagine what it was.

He doesn't have time to dodge as the fist slams into his stomach, sending him flying. The blow has him crashing into the wall on the other side of the plaza, the air leaving his lungs all at once. The Nomu is on him instantly, though, grabbing Izuku around the torso with one large hand and throwing him again.

Izuku rights himself just in time and rolls when he hits the ground, crouching down in a defensive position on instinct, strategies running through his mind.

It snapped Eraserhead's arm like a twig. Looking at any part of its body should have nullified any of its potential quirks, which means that the strength he used against Eraserhead is just his base strength. He's easily as strong as All Might even without external factors.

No strength quirk, it seems. Definitely shock absorption, but what about any others? Izuku is going in practically blind, which isn't good. Not at all.

Shigaraki just wants me dead, or else he would've gone for one of the other students. That part isn't surprising, at least.

Izuku's previous blows weren't doing anything. That's mostly due to the shock absorption, but also due to his ring. Izuku only has a few seconds to make up his mind. He slides off his ring and pockets it. He can use One for All without hurting his arms or legs directly, as the absorption will save him from that. But the moment the suppressor comes off, Izuku is doubling over, bright blood bubbling past his lips.

Shigaraki laughs from the side. "It's just as Sensei said, isn't it? You should have listened."

The boy just sends him the middle finger as he straightens up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. It's his third day of school and it's already the second time he's had to take off his ring. Just fantastic.

The Nomu shifts ever so slightly, a telltale sign of it about to move, and Izuku shoots for it first. He grips the knife in his left hand while he aims another blow with his right. But this time he activates *Pull* right before he can be thrown backwards, and he flies towards the Nomu's face. He slices it, just barely missing the eyes. *Fuck.*

He has to go for the weak points. That's the joints and visible organs. The brain is the biggest one, it seems. It might as well be a neon sign that tells Izuku to *just go for me!*

The Nomu's arm hits his chest and shoves him aside. Izuku drops down to form an *x* with his arms just as another punch rains down on him. *Deflect* seems to be useful after all. Another blow, and the invisible shield seems to crack under the force.

Izuku lets it up and leaps at the Nomu, his knee smashing into its chin before it can stop him, and the boy is about to stab his knife through its brain when its hand grabs him by the ankle and chucks him. It descends upon him instantly, and Izuku isn't quick enough to fully dodge the hit. His leg takes the brunt of it, and Izuku cries out as he throws his knife to get it to back off.

Izuku *pulls* the blade back toward him and forces himself up. The Nomu has an arm raised, another punch just waiting for him, but Izuku ducks between its legs and pivots on his heel, slicing the backs of its knees. The skin is too thick, however, revealing only pale flesh. It doesn't do the expected damage, but it's close enough.

He watches the Nomu fumble a bit before righting itself. It spins around in the blink of an eye, and the boy grabs onto its outstretched arm and swings himself up, trying to aim for the brain once again. A large palm comes up to smack his back like a fly, and Izuku is thrown directly beneath it. Its dark shadow looms over the boy's body, blocking out the light. When Izuku glances up he's met with soulless eyes staring back at him. He rolls to the side, trying to avoid being smashed into the ground like Eraserhead, only to get kicked like a goddamn soccer ball.

That's the one time Izuku doesn't roll, however.

He's lifted up by the back of his shirt, and Izuku is brought close to the Nomu's face. Its mouth is lined with a row of jagged teeth, not unlike Kirishima's. But these are bigger, and they look more like someone took a hammer to its regular teeth and chipped off the tops.

Izuku slices the wrist holding him and jumps up onto its arm, running along it with newfound determination. He doesn't miss the eyes this time, and the black blood that spurts in his face temporarily blinds him. He smears it in attempts to wipe it off, and the moment of distraction gives the Nomu enough time to twist around and punch him directly in the face. His nose breaks on impact, and Izuku bites back a cry of pain.

He can't miss his window, though, so he *pulls* himself back in and digs his knife into the Nomu's back, leaving it there like a foothold on a mountain. He wishes he had his bombs, or any of his weapons for that matter. This would be so much easier.

This is the only way Izuku can attack him without dying. It's like a game of cat and mouse, except Izuku frequently annoys the cat into lunging for him, which creates an opening for Izuku to duck in and land yet another heavy blow. It doesn't seem to be doing much but slow the creature down ever so slightly.

Izuku is getting tired. *So* tired. He might not be breaking his arms or legs because of the shock absorption, but the continuous use of his quirks is putting him in a craze. It doesn't help that his ring had flown out of his pocket during one of his moves.

At one point the Nomu's bone-like knee guard shatters upon one of Izuku's well-placed kicks, but the victory is short lived as a piece of the bone lodges itself inside Izuku's stomach. He tears it out immediately, using it as a sort of secondary knife, which is most

definitely a bad thing. That's a big rule Eraserhead makes him follow during patrols: you don't rip any weapon out of you unless you're sure it didn't hit an artery or some otherwise important organ or vein.

If you take it out, you'll just bleed even faster, most likely to death.

But Izuku thinks that even Eraserhead wouldn't fault him too much for this one given the current situation.

The Nomu can't reach him when Izuku manages to leap high onto its back, so it instead tries to dislodge him. The boy jerks out the blade he left in his flesh and stabs it once, twice in the brain, and the Nomu *shrieks.* It's so loud that the boy has to cover his ears and nearly falls off of the thing. A large hand yanks him by the foot and swings him around, throwing him into the ground with all of its strength like the boy's nothing more than a rag doll.

Izuku screams at the pressure to his spine, and he only prays that there will be no permanent damage. It's like he's paralyzed for a few seconds, as the boy can only lay there and try to steady his breathing.

The dust from the impact settles around him, and Izuku is taken aback by the silence.

Even without his ring, his senses are dull and frenzied. He feels like his head's been submerged beneath the concrete he lies sprawled upon, sealing his ears shut and making his eyes water. His limbs still ache with the phantom pain of the punch to his stomach, arms trembling as he pulls himself up from the ground.

Out of all his reckless ideas, Izuku thinks that this one has to be the worst by far.

But he's made it this long. He has to keep going.

Izuku lets himself cough roughly, the stolen air from his lungs replenishing itself with dust and bits of concrete. Groaning, he makes his way slowly to his feet, stumbling slightly as his body recalibrates how to distribute his weight. He blinks sluggishly, trying to clear his vision as he moves towards the epicenter of the plaza.

He doesn't make it more than a few feet before a rush of movement cuts through the haze of dust, knocking him off his feet and flipping him backwards over the ground. There's a blinding flash of pain in his leg, and Izuku realizes belatedly that his bone has just fractured from the repeated abuse. Fuck.

The whistle of wind grates through the ringing in his muffled ears as he turns himself over again.

Ah. The Nomu is still walking. Didn't Izuku incapacitate it? He felt its quirks die down, right? That's why it let go of him in the first place.

So why is it still fucking moving?

The answer comes to him quickly. Regeneration. The Nomu has a regeneration quirk.

And now that he's really thinking about it, Izuku can think past the soreness to his body and *feel* the pressure in his mind. The familiar pull that *Extract* is causing in his nerves. Oh. Izuku *wants* that quirk. Not so much the shock absorption—he wants the regeneration.

A sick thought pops up into his mind: if he steals it, will it cure the symptoms he's been experiencing? *Should* he even steal it? It's just a creature, after all, not a human. It doesn't count. He'd still be within the parameters of his promise to himself.

But is it still wrong?

The hand grabs him by the throat and wrenches him off the ground, dangling him in the air. Izuku can barely breathe, and he's suddenly aware of just how easy it would be for the Nomu to snap his neck. His leg is throbbing and burning, making it hard to think past the pain. He should take it right now. Both of his hands are free. His ring isn't on. His mind is screaming at him to just *do it.*

It's right there. Nobody would know. Nobody except Izuku and probably All for One.

Shigaraki whips around the moment the red lightning starts to dance hesitantly across Izuku's skin. "You wouldn't," he hisses, eyes blown wide.

...and his brother would know.

Smart. So fucking smart. It's almost scary how smart Shigaraki's become since the last time Izuku has seen him. It seems he was forced to grow up after All for One's prized possession left. Shigaraki knows Izuku's given quirk. How could he not?

"You're cheating!" He screams, the itching coming back full force. Izuku pauses, which is a mistake he'll regret for a long while after.

“Fine, fine. Do whatever, you traitor. I can just... I can just kill those other two.”

Shigaraki is darting towards Tsuyu and Mineta. How he even noticed them crouching in the waters of the flood zone is beyond Izuku. The boy is busy trying to escape from the chokehold now, writhing like a dying fish. His vision is growing dark, and he’s painfully aware of the fact that he can’t get to them, not with the hand around his throat. *Extract* takes a few seconds to complete the process, so it’s not even worth doing now. None of his abilities are fast enough to stop what Shigaraki’s going to do. He watches as his brother’s hand reaches for Tsuyu’s face, and he yells. It sounds more like a yelp and a plea mixed together, but he doesn’t care.

Because all he can see is her face, slightly confused and worried, and then Mineta, right beside her and oblivious with fear. He won’t be fast enough. Never fast enough.

They don’t deserve this. Not even Mineta, who should’ve been expelled the moment he stepped on campus. *Nobody* deserves to die like that.

Izuku holds out a trembling hand, palm up. He doesn’t care anymore. Whatever it takes to save them. *Pull* is on the tips of his fingertips, but he’s still too late. Shigaraki’s hand lands on her face, but—

Nothing happens.

Izuku turns his head as much as he can to see Eraserhead. The man is just barely awake now, clinging onto consciousness with his head lifted a few inches off the ground. His eyes are tinted red, and blood covers every inch of his face. Thank god, Izuku practically cries, but then the meaning of his awakening is enough to have the boy wincing, because that means the Erasure hero might’ve heard some of what Izuku said to Shigaraki.

“Oh. You really are cool, Eraserhead.”

The underground hero goes limp only a few moments after that, energy depleted, and Izuku doesn’t waste any more time. He yanks Shigaraki back as far as *Pull’s* energy will allow, far away from his classmates. He hopes Tsuyu and Mineta are too scared to be able to recall those details in the future. The Nomu flings him halfway across the plaza yet again, and the boy falls into the crater he’d been in moments before. He chokes on the blood coming up his throat. He’s had his ring off for too long now. He can’t even *find* it.

Something sharp digs into his side, and Izuku cranes his neck to see a flash of dirty silver beside him. His knife.

Izuku picks up the fallen blade beside him and aims, desperate now. He counts five of the Nomu's steps before he throws it, the sharp metal landing in between the divots of its brain. It sinks in all the way with the force that Izuku threw it with, and the Nomu freezes, twitching as the knife hits that special mark. The creature's skin seems to crackle and tear as the regeneration starts to fail in keeping up with its injuries. Izuku *pulls* the blade back with his remaining energy, clutching it tightly in his hand.

The Nomu stumbles forward, the ground vibrating underneath Izuku with every large step. Fuck it. Izuku can't move quickly anymore, not with his broken leg, so he'll just have to let the creature come at him again and take the quirk when it descends upon him. He still doesn't have much of a chance against the creature's raw power, but anything helps at this point.

The Nomu is walking towards him at an unsteady pace. It looks like it's going to keel over, black sludge running down its arms and abdomen. Izuku only needs a few seconds for *Extract* to work. He only needs to get both palms on his skin. He can do it. The regeneration is calling his name.

But then there's an explosion that rocks the earth, and everyone freezes and looks up the steps leading to the entrance.

"Fear not!" All Might shouts in all of his glory, steam coming off of his skin as he stands in front of a large hole in the wall. "I am here!"

And for once, he's not smiling.

Izuku shivers, lying limp on the ground as the realization that *they're going to be okay* comes into mind. *It's okay.*

The Nomu is already pretty wounded. It won't take much more to finish him off. It's Shigaraki and Kurogiri that he's worried about.

There's more shouted words, but Izuku can't bring himself to listen to them. Izuku sees All Might fly overhead, and he realizes with overwhelming relief that he's heading for Eraserhead. He's going to get Tsuyu and Mineta out of there, too.

Izuku feels the chains around his heart loosen up at the knowledge.

When All Might comes back, it's less than five seconds later, and he's empty handed. He must've already deposited the others up by the entrance.

Eraserhead is okay, then. And so are the other two.

His face looks horrified as he steps down into the crater and picks Izuku up in his arms. "My boy," he says lowly. "I am so sorry. I had a bad feeling about this and came as soon as I could."

Izuku just shakes his head. "Shock absorption," he grits out, continuing at the man's confused look. "The creature. It has regen. Tear it apart, don't waste time on heavy attacks."

All Might nods curtly. "You all did wonderful holding out. I'm proud of you." He grips him tighter as he leaves the crater, and Izuku would probably feel more embarrassed at being held bridal style if he didn't currently feel two steps away from death. The hero bypasses the few remaining criminals, who are busy gawking at the number one's presence, and only stops to face Shigaraki when the younger man speaks.

"I've been waiting, hero." Shigaraki sounds happy all of a sudden, as if he hadn't just been having a tantrum a few minutes prior. "You're worthless. Throwing punches to save people. Hah. That's our state-censored violence."

All Might stiffens, and Izuku feels irritation rush through him as Shigaraki continues.

"You're fast. Too fast to keep up with, but not as fast as expected. Could it really be true..." He takes the hand off his face and grins. "That you're getting weaker?"

Damn. He didn't have to call him out like that.

All Might sets him down on the edge of the steps. "Sit tight," he orders, as if Izuku can go anywhere else in the condition he's in. His mentor starts to move towards the trio of villains, eyes narrowed.

"Shigaraki," Kurogiri warns. "The Nomu is not at full function. We must retreat."

"Ah, what's the harm in staying a few minutes longer? I want to see if Sensei's predictions were correct."

All Might doesn't even ask who Sensei is, he just heads directly for the Nomu. He seems to have taken Izuku's advice seriously, as he doesn't even blink when the Nomu takes the hero's heavy punch with ease. All Might simply moves around it and grabs a hold of its back, preparing to slam it into the ground to cease its power. But then the mist is spiraling up again, and the Nomu goes through the ground, reappearing right underneath All Might's torso. Its huge arms grab onto him and try to drag him under, and that's when Izuku understands Kurogiri's new plan.

All Might's going to get cut in half.

Izuku raises a palm, staring at his old caretaker. He can pull the neckpiece and throw him off kilter, which will hopefully stop his concentration on the portals. But before Izuku can potentially reveal his secret, there's a loud explosion to his right, and Kacchan comes flying out of nowhere, Kirishima right beside him. They attack Kurogiri first, and this time they don't fail. The warp villain is thrown to the ground, and then Shigaraki is forced to dodge as Kirishima goes for him next.

"Crap!" The redhead falls back beside Kacchan. "Almost had him!"

The air around them is suddenly chilly, and then Todoroki is appearing from behind Izuku, walking over to the other boys. "So I heard you people were here to kill All Might." Ice suddenly shoots from his foot and frosts over the ground, crawling up the Nomu's side. "But scum like you could never kill the Symbol of Peace."

Oh thank fuck.

All Might wrenches free from the Nomu's grip and readies himself again. He's bleeding from the torso due to the creature's nails, but other than that, the injuries on him don't look fatal.

Kacchan pins down Kurogiri with ease, practically spitting on the villain as he snarls, "If I decide you're doing anything fishy, I'll blow your ass up so bad they'll be piecing you back together for weeks."

Izuku almost laughs at the familiarity of those words. It's good to have one constant in this whole mess.

"Ooh, that doesn't sound very heroic," Kirishima says. It almost sounds like a tease.

"Nomu," Shigaraki orders angrily. "Take out the explosive brat. We

need our escape route back."

The creature gets to its feet, swaying even worse. Its hyper regeneration isn't as good as it was before, that's for sure. The blood that's now spurting from its brain and body is proof of that. Before the Nomu can even begin to reach Kacchan, All Might is tackling the thing out of the way and wrestling with it. Izuku breathes out a sigh of relief, knowing the blond is spared.

"Deku," his friend says, staring down at him intensely.

Izuku answers the silent question with a nod. He's fine. He can hold out for now. Who knew that a gym uniform could soak up so much blood?

Shigaraki is obviously starting to get agitated. This is when Izuku's brother starts to get petty, just as he used to back in those days. He doesn't like when things don't go his way. "Violence in the name of saving others is admirable? Isn't it, hero? You know what, that pisses me off. Heroes and villains both thrive on violence, but we're still categorized. *You're good,* and *you're bad.* That's how it is."

"God, shut the hell up," Izuku mutters to himself. He thinks he hears Kacchan snort at that, but he's not sure.

"Symbol of peace, hah? In the end, you're just a tool for violence, made to keep us down! And violence only breeds more violence."

"What a load a crap," All Might grunts, still working to push back the creature. Izuku silently cheers for him. "Idealistic criminals have a different sort of fire in their eyes."

And in a way, they're both correct. Shigaraki has a good point, but the fact that he's using it to justify what he's doing invalidates the actual meaning of the argument. The Symbol of Peace is one hundred percent correct as well, as violence against violence is the only way to solve anything these days. You really do have to fight fire with fire sometimes.

You can't have good without evil. It's not just one without the other. That's where Shigaraki's thinking is slightly flawed.

All Might's blows are so fast and brutal that not even Izuku can truly make them out. It's like a blur, and the boy knows what his mentor is doing. The Nomu's quirk is absorption, after all, not negation, which means there's a limit. He can just *exceed* that limit, and then an

opening will be created. And since Izuku tired the Nomu out, the regeneration won't be as frequent.

It's a winning battle, but not one without consequence.

All Might keeps hitting blow after blow, just like Izuku tried to do. Except where Izuku had only been able to land hits all around the Nomu to avoid getting grabbed, All Might can afford to stay in one place and keep up his flurry of attacks. He's breaking down its defenses with each brutal punch.

And when the smoke and blood starts to trail out of the man's mouth, everyone can only watch in awe as All Might crouches down low and delivers one final smash. The world shakes as the shockwave of All Might's powerful blow hits them like a tidal wave. The Nomu is sent flying up and out of the USJ altogether, smashing through the glass ceiling and disappearing from view.

"Like straight outta the comics." Kirishima whispers in awe once the wind dies down. "He smashed his way past the absorption. The ultimate bruiser! And against that power, the regeneration wasn't able to keep up with the hits."

Izuku lets out a shaky smile. *That's* what the best of the best looks like. This is the top. The top world of the pros. *All Might* is the best of the best.

"I *am* slowing down." The number one hero admits, facing Shigaraki and Kurogiri. "In my prime, only five of those hits would've been enough. But if you think you can take me, go right ahead."

It's a bluff. All Might looks to only have less than a minute left. He's trying to scare them off, and it might just work.

Izuku feels another wave of nausea overcome him suddenly and throws up on the side of the steps.

"All of you cheated." Shigaraki stares straight at Izuku with a glint in his crazed eyes. "And you killed my *Nomu!"*

Whiny fuck.

He's angry now, which makes him all the more dangerous. The villain moves forward, towards the students, and Izuku straightens up. All Might won't be able to do anything this time without transforming. He can't even take another step, Izuku can tell. The smoke coming off of

his body gives it away.

Shigaraki ignores the warnings from Kurogiri and rushes forward, ready to take Kacchan and the other two head on, only for shots to ring out in the air.

The younger villain stumbles back, blood suddenly darkening his black shirt. He got hit in the shoulders.

Snipe. Which can only mean—

“Sorry everyone!” Principal Nezu calls from the top of the stairs. “We’re a little late. We brought everyone we could.”

Iida made it. The boy brought reinforcements.

Izuku can barely lift his head, but he can sense the familiar powers of his teachers now that he’s looking for them. He can feel Midnight, Cementoss, Present Mic, and even more. Is that Vlad King and Power Loader as well? The unfamiliar one must be Hound Dog, then.

“They’re here. Game over,” Shigaraki says quietly, seething. “Guess we have to try again another time, Kurogiri.”

Snipe aims again, but Kurogiri’s mist sucks them in before they can hit. Shigaraki starts to move backwards, into the larger portal the villain had created, but Thirteen starts to pull him back. The rescue hero seems to be in bad shape, but they’re still pulling through. Izuku could help, too, if he wanted. *Pull* could probably succeed in holding Shigaraki back, but he doesn’t do a thing.

Izuku lets him go, and the worst part is he doesn’t even know why. He doesn’t even care about the prospect of his teachers finding out about his powers. Not while he’s beginning to get so delirious.

Shigaraki locks eyes with the heroes and says one last thing before disappearing into the void. “The next time we meet, you’re dead.”

Izuku doesn’t think he’s just referring to All Might.

And then the villains are gone, just like that, leaving behind the rest of the students and heroes. The giggle that Izuku lets out is almost scary to those that hear it. Now that he’s completely sure they’re gone, that the threat has been taken care of, the exhaustion takes over him. He can barely respond to the students talking to him. He hopes All Might is covered from view, as he certainly must have transformed by now.

And what a way that would be to get your secret revealed, huh?

The next few minutes blur together. The next thing he can remember is someone holding him bridal style again, his vision suddenly bright. Are they outside now? He smells something sweet. That must be Kacchan holding him then. Does this count as the blond's apology? Izuku would accept it immediately if that's the case.

Warmth hits his face. They definitely must be outside now. The knife in his hand, still coated in the Nomu's black blood, drops to the floor with a clang. He didn't realize he'd been holding onto it so tightly.

Izuku's fingers itch for it on instinct, even when he's long past the point of consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

wrong nomu, izuku

ALSO AHHHHHHHHH LOOK AT THIS AMAZING ANIMATION ON YOUTUBE!!! This is by 'em' on the discord server, and I can't even express how much I FUCKING love it!!!! I can't stop watching it fjfkddsllfk. You can find more of em's art on her IG: @emfriedrice slskfjfjkfkdk

f

uncharted waters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tomura is agitated.

He falls to the ground the moment he steps through Kurogiri's mist, face-planting into the old hardwood flooring of the bar. The villain lets out a hiss and squirms the rest of the way out of the portal, seething. The events of today are plaguing his mind and crowding his thoughts, and he stays in his crumpled up position to try and curb his frustration.

"I was shot," Tomura reports, knowing full well that the small television sitting on the counter is listening. "Both arms and both legs. We got crushed." He moves his head to try and sit up, but some of the blood pooling from his shoulder gets on Father's hand and makes him frantically yank the appendage off his face to wipe it clean. "My Nomu was taken down in a flash. Even those kids were strong."

The disgust edges back into his voice near the end, and Tomura shifts so he's looking at the dusty ceiling. His injuries will be healed soon enough, so he'll be fine. He's more focused on the anger that's now burning at his skin, on the fingers scratching at his neck with a newfound vigor.

"The Symbol of Peace is in perfect health! You were wrong, master."

The monitor crackles. *"No, I wasn't."* A slight pause; Tomura writhes on the floor for a moment to contain his irritation. *"We merely got ahead of ourselves. Yes, we underestimated him. It is a good thing the villains came cheap."*

That's an understatement. Those petty criminals had no business associating with the League of Villains. In fact, if Tomura had his way, they wouldn't have even hired such low-level thugs. The so-called villains just made the League look bad with how easily they were taken down by one pro hero. They were simple NPC's, not important for anything except keeping the background active and interesting, and Tomura *hates* that the League had to stoop so low just to fail in the end.

"And what of our creation? Did you retrieve him?"

Tomura just growls and turns back on his side, glaring at Kurogiri as the villain manifests into his usual attire and answers for him.

“He was sent flying. And unless we ascertain his precise coordinates, no amount of warping will let us find him.” The bartender starts to wipe the insides of the hanging wine glasses on the back wall one at a time. “I couldn’t spare the time back there.”

The static starts up again. *“After all the trouble we went through to make him as strong as All Might, hm? Well, that’s too bad. A real shame.”*

“Right. Strong.” Tomura fidgets from his place on the floor, his next words tumbling from his mouth before he can think better of them. Not that he would’ve kept quiet even if he had, of course. “There was one. One kid who seemed just as fast as All Might.”

“Oh?”

Fake. Even through speakers, Tomura can hear the amused tilt to All for One’s tone. The boy hisses again, practically whining. “Sensei, you knew he would be there, didn’t you?” It’s more of an accusation than a question. “He deserves to pay for what he’s done, so why didn’t you tell me? We wouldn’t have failed!”

“Now, Tomura, your brother is very independent.” The centuries-old villain sounds like he’s smiling, all sharp teeth and bloodstained lips. *“Having you bring him back today or even kill him would have been counterproductive. Besides, I think little Izuku needs more time to be left alone before his punishment.”*

Ah. Tomura is starting to understand now. The only reason Midoriya Izuku isn’t in their clutches right now is because All for One wills it so. It’s been a few years since the brat’s escape, which would have been more than enough time for the villain to get him back. Sure, Izuku’s very slick when he wants to be, and he’s also very hard to find, but in the end there’s nothing anyone can do against All for One’s wit and power. It’s simply the way things are.

Sensei wants to wait. He wants to give Izuku the illusion of freedom, and then he wants to rip the rug right out from under him and take the boy back by force. It’s cruel, it’s sinister, and it’s the perfect way to make sure Izuku knows where he belongs. His antics have gone on for far too long, not that Tomura is complaining. He doesn’t miss his brother’s company one bit.

The brat was favored by All for One anyway. He was trained

personally and given all of these special powers—and then he just left. He was fed on a gold fucking spoon, and then he threw that all away. Midoriya Izuku is spoiled rotten, and Tomura hates him. He wants to *kill* him.

Sensei probably doesn't have the same sentiment, but he doesn't care. All for One will most likely try to make use of the boy despite his unwillingness, as if Izuku is even worth anything anymore after his betrayal. He's not. He's just an obstacle in Tomura's way.

He doesn't want him to return. He might take back his place as All for One's prized possession, and that wouldn't be good at all. For anyone involved.

The pain in his limbs have dulled away to a numb sort of throbbing, pulling Tomura back from his thinking. "Without that pest, we might have killed All Might... but that *brat* damaged the Nomu before he got there."

"No use crying over spilled milk, Tomura. He will get his dues. First he dares to associate with his fated rival, knowing the consequences of such foolishness, and then he attempts to become a hero at a school for fakes. Selfish, wouldn't you say?" His voice is a low rumble from the television. *"This endeavor was not a complete loss, however. Find stronger troops; take all the time you need."*

Tomura plans to. He won't make this mistake again. He won't fail his sensei a second time.

"We can't move freely just yet. That's why we need a symbol like you, Tomura! Next time, the world will know of the terror you represent."

It sounds like a promise. Like a mere statement of fact. And that's how Tomura knows it's true; All for One will make sure it is.

It always feels good to be praised by his master. He never used to get this when Izuku was still around, so that's another reason he's glad the boy's going to be six feet under soon. Tomura will become the next anti-symbol of peace in his place. He will make everyone fear his name and tremble at his very presence, and that's a promise, too. He's going to make those *heroes* regret ever being born.

And he's going to start with his little brother.

When Izuku wakes up, he's not alone. That's the first thing he notices. His brain is fuzzy, and he can barely think past the pounding in his temples, but he manages to sit himself up with difficulty.

Hm. His leg has been healed.

A quick glance around tells Izuku that this is the nurse's room, but it feels a little more crowded than it was just this morning. Another bed has been brought in for All Might, and the—

Wait. *All Might?*

Izuku's eyes blow wide as the memories of the most recent events come back to him, and he nearly falls off his bed in his attempts to get up and *move.* His arm is yanked back, and that's when he realizes there's an IV taped to the inside of his elbow. Which can only mean—

"My boy, are you alright?"

His head snaps around to face his mentor, who's sitting up as well. The hero looks rough, to put it nicely. He looks like he just rolled out of some bushes and fell into a meat grinder with the bandages all around his chest and stomach. He must've pushed himself past his limit yet again, damaging himself even further. It's a wonder he's even alive right now, in all honesty.

"Midoriya?"

That's Recovery Girl's voice. The healer is sitting on the rolling stool by her computer, staring at him with a frown.

"My blood!" Is the only thing that comes out of his mouth. Izuku freezes, realizing just how stupid that sounds. He really is a dumbass, huh? "My blood," he repeats, more composed this time. "Did you take it?"

Recovery Girl takes off her glasses and peers at him curiously. "You're asking if I did a blood test, dear?"

Izuku can't speak for fear of saying something he might regret, so he just nods.

"I didn't, sonny. What's going in your arm right now is a simple pain killer, so I didn't need to test anything before putting it in. Though from the look on your face I don't think it's quite working to the extent it should." She tilts her head. "I'm guessing you have a high metabolism due to your enhancements?"

All Might is staring at him as well, silently listening to their conversation with a concerned downturn of his lips.

"Uh, yeah," Izuku grits out, voice rough. His body feels a little prickly, almost as if it's *trying* to get numb but can't quite get there. "It's fine, though."

"Hm, if you say so. Next time, however, I will make some changes to make sure you have what you need. Something that'll actually work." She turns back to her computer, and Izuku feels slightly better at the knowledge that his blood hasn't been taken. Not this time, at least.

He needs to be more careful in the future. This conversation could've been singing a very different tune right now.

"The situation being what it was," Recovery Girl continues tiredly. "I can't scold you two this time."

All Might sighs. "I think I've probably shortened my time limit again. I'll be lucky if I still get an hour a day."

Guilt hits Izuku like a speeding truck, making the boy wince. Not even an hour? There's not much the number one hero can do in that time frame. He still has an appearance to keep up, and if he only shows up for a short while the people are bound to get concerned. And coupled with being a teacher at UA, where his classes are expected to be more than an hour long sometimes, the man's future doesn't look too good now.

I caused that, Izuku thinks sourly. *If only I'd told them my suspicions, if only I'd been better. I should've been able to take down that Nomu completely so he wouldn't have had to push himself.*

His fault. The weight of the words are like bricks tied to his feet.

"All Might..." Izuku whispers, trailing off.

“Ah, whaddya gonna do!” The blond shrugs, panting just a little bit as he shifts to sit criss-cross applesauce. “Bad things happen! This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

But did it have to be this soon?

A fizz of energy hits the back of Izuku’s mind, and the boy lifts his head to glance at the door just as a few knocks ring out. The door opens a moment later, and Detective Tsukauchi walks through.

“Pardon me,” the man says, lifting off his hat in such a funny fashion that Izuku has to snap his jaw shut so he won’t tease him about it. He’s done that multiple times before, most of those as Rabbit. “Long time no see, All Might.”

Izuku then realizes two things at once: the first being that Tsukauchi knows about One for All, something that Izuku had only assumed before now. He’s pretty sure All Might must have told Izuku that at one point, but if so, the boy forgot all about it. The second being that All Might has probably talked to Tsukauchi about Izuku, seeing as the detective doesn’t blink an eye at Izuku being in the same room as a deflated All Might.

“Tsukauchi,” the hero starts, choking up blood. “Didn’t know you were here!”

“I’m just here to ask some questions regarding the attack. Is this a good time?”

All Might seems to straighten up, a lot more serious. “Wait, hold on. First, are the students all right? And Aizawa and Thirteen?”

At the mention of his classmates and teachers, Izuku swallows back the blood threatening to rise up his throat and forces himself to listen.

Tsukauchi lets out a small breath. “Besides Midoriya over there, the students’ve got nothing more than a few bumps and bruises. And Aizawa and Thirteen are out of danger for now.”

For now. They shouldn’t have even been hurt to begin with. None of this should’ve happened. *There must’ve been talk of the invasion on the streets since Shigaraki was hiring,* Izuku thinks. *If I had concentrated more on my patrols, maybe I would’ve heard something. We would’ve been prepared. Why* didn’t *I hear something about this?*

“If you three heroes hadn’t put your lives on the line,” Tsukauchi says.

“The students wouldn’t have made it out unscathed.”

Izuku thinks of Thirteen’s cracked helmet, of the parts of the rescue hero that seemed to have been destroyed by their own quirk. That must’ve been Kurogiri’s doing.

He thinks of All Might’s reduced time limit, of the bandages covering his middle. His mentor’s secret was almost found out today. He guesses that one of the other pros got him out of there before he could be seen by one of the students.

And then Izuku thinks of Aizawa. His sensei, broken and bloody, being pounded further into the ground with each sickening blow of the Nomu’s fist. He thinks of Aizawa gathering up the last bit of his strength to protect Tsuyu and Mineta where Izuku couldn’t. Where Izuku *failed* to.

So close to dying. So close to leaving behind the world forever, of leaving behind his partner—someone Izuku is *seventy* percent sure he knows the identity of. He was so close to leaving behind Izuku, and maybe that’s a selfish thing to think, but it’s only one of the many, many thoughts bumbling around inside Izuku’s head.

He tunes back in to hear All Might talking about how the students put their lives on the line, too. About how they were thrown into a real battle at such a young age, and how they now know how cruel and scary the world can be—but Izuku can’t get himself to focus on the conversation anymore.

His mentor is right. The battle is serving as a kind of eye-opener for Izuku. He’s fought villains before, of course, there’s just something about *this* particular fight that makes it so different. It’s the circumstances that are causing a hole to be carved inside his chest, hollowing out his insides. His patrols are different from this precisely because the rest of the students were there this time. He rarely has to protect such a large group of people, and rarely does he ever have to fight a creature as strong as the Nomu.

Today has been one of the scariest and hardest battles of his life, and Izuku has a feeling that it’s pretty high up there on All Might’s own list of terrible battles.

Even if it’s only because of how terrifying it was.

“Aizawa,” Izuku begins, glancing up from where he was fiddling with the corners of his thin blanket. “Are his eyes okay?”

Tsukauchi turns to him for what feels like the first time since he entered the room, and Izuku's gut clenches at the look in his eye. There's something there he doesn't like. "He's going to be in casts for a bit of time, son, but his vision is going to be alright. No blindness or loss of sight."

"What about his Erasure?"

It's Recovery Girl who answers, having been silently typing away at her computer until now. "His own time limit has decreased, but only by a few seconds. His quirk hasn't been damaged otherwise."

But his body has. Izuku can still remember the dust floating up into the air as the hero's elbow disintegrated under Shigaraki's touch, can still remember the chills that went down his own spine upon hearing the snap of Aizawa's bone when the Nomu pinned him to the concrete. He can still hear the man's cut-off scream echoing in his ears.

He wants to throw up. In fact, the only reason he hasn't coughed up any more blood is because of the painkillers his body is burning through. It's not much, but it's helping.

He needs to find his—

"And by the way, Midoriya," Tsukauchi reaches into his tan overcoat and pulls out something small. He crosses the distance between them and presses the object into his palm. "Your friend found this in the rubble. Wouldn't let me leave until I promised to give it to you."

Izuku's eyes widen when he sees the ring sitting in his hand now. It's definitely his—the running rabbit on the side is proof of that. And even before Izuku frantically slides it on without hesitation, the boy can feel the comfort it provides from where it's resting in his palm. It's like all of his senses have been dulled the moment he slips it back into its normal spot, and he *revels* in the feeling. *Oh, thank god.*

"That boy really is scary," Tsukauchi mutters, All Might nodding sagely in agreement.

The detective must be referring to Kacchan, though how the blond even managed to find it so quickly is beyond Izuku. He must've noticed how Izuku didn't have it on while carrying him. *So much for having to search for it. I'm gonna hug him so fucking hard when I see him.*

Again. He really hopes that these small actions are Kacchan's way of

apologizing. Izuku doesn't like staying mad at the boy for long. He can't handle being alone, not anymore.

"But back to the matter at hand," Tsukauchi continues with a sigh. He thanks Recovery Girl for pulling out a chair for him and sits down. "Sorry to do this so soon, but I'd like to get both of your accounts on what happened. I already interviewed the other students, this is just for the record." He turns a pointed eyebrow towards Izuku. "Especially since you were the closest to the leaders of this attack, right?"

Izuku just nods, and he's thankful when the detective starts with All Might first. He listens only to the first part of his explanation. Apparently the hero was on the way to the USJ after having bad feelings about not being there, only to run into Iida.

That's luck, if Izuku's ever seen it.

When his own turn comes around, Izuku swallows down his nerves and *acts.*

He can't lie, not to Tsukauchi, so instead he answers vaguely and makes sure to drop certain details that throw the man off track. He tells them the truth about fighting the Nomu and how he tried to go for the weak spots, only for his moments of distraction to allow Shigaraki time to go for his two classmates. He tells them that he talked to Crusty Lips about his motives and why he brought the Nomu —which isn't a lie, technically. He *did* do that, among other things. Izuku just makes sure to leave out the incriminating parts.

And by the time he's done, Tsukauchi has a few pages of information down and All Might is staring at Izuku with something sad in his blue eyes.

Recovery Girl finishes up his healing in that timeframe, making another bout of exhaustion threaten to overtake the boy. Tsukauchi is the first one to leave the nurse's room, and Izuku avoids any further conversation with the hero sitting beside him.

The guilt is eating him up again. He can barely stand being in the same space as All Might right now.

He can only hope that everything turns out alright.

When Izuku gets home after a long, painstaking walk, he gets to work.

First he opens up the security footage from the USJ. He takes time to review the recovered video and takes notes of the criminals and students he sees.

He was right. Multiple groups of students were sent to different zones that rendered their quirks close to useless, putting them at a disadvantage. He watches his classmates fight and eventually win their own battles, writing the information down all the while in a new journal of his. This one is going to be dedicated solely to the attack, and he's planning on giving it to Eraserhead.

He has an excuse as to why he knows so much about the villains: he fought them alongside his teacher. No one should think much of the amount of information he's going to give.

Izuku moves on to the most pressing matter, however: his fight with the Nomu. Most of the sound files during Izuku's conversation with Shigaraki are easy enough to get rid of, so that's one thing he doesn't have to worry about, but you can still clearly see him use *Pull* and even *Deflect* at one point of the video. The angles are a bit suspicious, but it's still there, and those powers are obviously not a part of One for All.

If someone is familiar with Izuku and his two enhancement quirks, it'll be easy to figure out that there's more to what's going on.

He needs to get rid of this section. Corrupt the data in case Principal Nezu tries to review it himself.

It takes longer than expected, and Izuku can only hope that the mammal didn't already do this and copy the files onto a hard drive or something—then Izuku would be screwed.

He skips over Aizawa's fight with the Nomu, not wanting to be reminded of the gory scene still playing on repeat in his mind, and

instead watches what happens *after* All Might arrives.

He watches as he takes Mineta and Tsuyu up to the top of the stairs, followed by an unmoving Aizawa, and he tips his head when All Might drops screen-Izuku off to the side before dealing with the threat.

Izuku raises his brows in mild surprise when Kacchan and Kirishima appear from seemingly nowhere and help out. Todoroki enters from a neighboring zone and freezes the Nomu, allowing All Might to break free.

They were all fighting *together.* They were helping. Izuku wasn't alone.

But that's—that's not quite right.

He only has himself. He can only *afford* to act alone; it's a system he's been clinging onto since the day he left his father's clutches. But now he has more friends, he has more people who care about him. More people who actually want to *be* around him. The thought is slightly horrifying, as Izuku knows firsthand what happens when he gets close to others.

He's going to have to keep his distance from here on out, no matter how hard or mean it is. It's his own fault for letting himself get close to them anyways, and look where that's gotten them? In the midst of a villain attack on their third day of school.

My fault. Should've known. Should've listened more intently to other vigilantes and heroes, and then I might've heard about the League's plans and would have been able to prevent it.

Whether or not the attack happened because of Izuku directly is unclear, but that doesn't matter.

The system has changed a little bit recently, just enough to allow more people through. Just enough for Izuku to feel that lingering panic after every sentence he utters to his new friends. Because *friend* isn't a word he's supposed to know. Kacchan is a friend, sure, but somehow he's more than that. Izuku has never really called him that because he's always just *been* there; a steady calm in the storm that is Izuku's life.

And maybe Kacchan did used to bully him, and maybe he did abandon Izuku once before, right after Inko did, but that doesn't matter either. What matters is that he's here now, and he *cares.* In his

own way.

After Izuku escaped the grasp of his father, he swore that he'd make a better life for himself. He wouldn't be anyone's puppet. He would find a new normal, and he'd be alright.

And he *has* been finding it, It's just been taking some time, that's all.

Some days, everything flows. He gets up and finds his rhythm and lives his new normal. His bones protest the motion of *forward* but he keeps going and going and going, because he has to.

But sometimes, Izuku wakes up and he can't move. He wakes up and he doesn't want to do anything or be anything, and darkness threatens to stain every inch of a world he once knew to be bright.

There are days when Izuku feels like the world is too big, but his insides are squeezed tight until they feel like they'll pop. The days he'll curl up into a ball on the bathroom floor and press his hands over his ears to try and make his brain just stop.

These are the days Izuku can only see blood on a man's face or watch the knife in his hand dig into an innocent person's back until they fall slack on the floor. The days he'll hear himself scream and gurgle from the spit built in his mouth, white-hot electricity running through his veins and burning beneath his skin. The days where he'll see gnawing teeth barking at him, the harsh words cutting through the invisible fog in his mind like a blade.

"Don't stop. Not until you've taken the last remnants of their being and made it your own. Not until they stop begging for you to leave them and instead start begging for you to finish the job."

Izuku snatches some clothes off the floor and throws himself into the shower, washing and rinsing himself with vigor. The icy cold water seems to calm the burning sensation under his skin, but not for long.

He doesn't know why he's thinking all of this. It must be because of his surprise family reunion today. Must be because of the knowledge that All for One *knows.* He knows about Izuku's attendance at UA, probably knows about his closeness with All Might, and probably knows about a whole bunch of other shit that Izuku can't even begin to think of right now.

And it's sending the boy into a spiral of self-doubt and hatred.

His head still hurts from the sharp waves of pain that pulse through it, and it's made even worse when he tries to pull on his clothes. He has to stop after putting his pants on and sit with his head in his hands, trying not to throw up from the pain.

It truly feels like someone has hammered a nail into his skull, piercing it in half while his ears ache in a different way. They seem too sensitive and keen, something he isn't used to.

He can hear every little drip of water in his abandoned apartment, every little creak of the pipes and soft pawsteps from Missy, and all he wants to do is rip his own ears out.

Izuku pants out a steamy breath, peeling himself off of the closed toilet. He finally throws on his shirt and adjusts it so it lies flat.

He has to get back to his desk. He has to finish watching the camera footage so he has an idea of where to patrol tomorrow night.

Oh, right. He hasn't even turned in that essay for Present Mic. Fuck.

The voice hero assigned it yesterday, and it's not even that difficult. It's just a simple one page assignment where they're supposed to introduce themselves and write down their favorite hobbies—not even in English, for god's sake. He would've finished it that same class period had he actually put in the effort, but now he's stuck scrambling.

Izuku doubts the man would make it due the day back now that everything's gone to shit, but still. He needs to get it done sometime soon.

Cold breath slithers up the column of his neck and he gags. It crawls up further, covering his chin, his cheeks, everything—

Izuku collapses on his way out the bathroom door, legs giving out on him as his head feels like it's being pierced again by a spike. The chill continues to crawl up his face and leave nothing but pain behind.

He shakily raises his hands up to grasp at his head, settling them in his mess of dark hair. He grips at the green curls, feeling the pinpricks of pain as he pulls on the strands.

He has to get up, get up, get up, *get up*—

Izuku manages to pull one of his legs underneath him and then the

other, now kneeling on the damp floor, hands still buried in his wet hair.

Another sharp pain pierces through his skull.

Izuku can smell iron in his nose, the heavy, metallic scent overwhelming him, a warning sign that his nose is about to start bleeding.

Drip. Drip.

“No, no, no, no—” Izuku chokes out, wiping his nose with the back of his hand and seeing the crimson liquid that now coats the skin. He covers his nose and runs to the kitchen, grabbing a towel to replace his hand.

He can feel the blood coat the back of his throat and mouth with that acrid metallic taste. He spits, filling the sink with dark bile.

Izuku shakily removes the stained cloth from his nose and folds it over itself, now covering his mouth.

He slumps against the counter for who knows how long, blood steadily streaming out of his nose and dribbling from his mouth until eventually it ceases to a few drops.

He is so incredibly tired.

He took his pill today. He has his ring on. So why the *fuck* is this happening? He shouldn’t be feeling like this, shouldn’t be struggling this much. His emotions are a mess, his mind a hurricane, and now his body is trembling and breaking apart.

Is this his punishment for not taking the quirk? The regeneration that *Extract* so badly wanted?

He should’ve. He really should have. Izuku knows how much it would’ve helped. It probably would’ve stopped all of *this* from happening, actually, but now he’s stuck with it. He didn’t take it, and he still can’t figure out why he hesitated. It’s not human. It’s a creature, right? It could barely think for itself, so if anything Izuku would’ve been doing it a favor by taking its power. It would’ve been defeated so much more easily. Wouldn’t have had to go through that pain and trouble.

But if it feels pain then that means it still has human qualities. It’d let

out the most ear-piercing shriek when Izuku sliced open its brain, so it definitely feels pain. Meaning it still would've been wrong for him to steal the quirk since *Extract* hurts to use. For both sides. It's essentially tearing a piece of somebody's soul away, ripping it from their being and forcing it to be Izuku's own. It's unpleasant, to say the least, and it would've been terrible.

Immoral. Even for a creature.

He can blame All Might's interruption all he wants, as he'd convinced himself to steal it anyway at that specific moment before the hero's entrance, but the truth remains that there were so many other opportunities for him to take it. And he didn't. He just let it slip through his fingers.

So now *Extract* is punishing him.

Izuku is finally back in his chair after somewhat successfully avoiding bleeding out. So far, he's sacrificed two towelettes, having to chuck them out of his window and onto a nearby roof to avoid any patrolling heroes finding them on the ground.

His pain isn't gone completely. It's just turned into an aching thump at the back of his skull—nothing a few pain-relievers can't handle. He grabs at the bottle of pills that the doctor at the Club gave him and swallows down two more tablets. He should only have to take one a day, according to the doctor himself, but it doesn't seem that that's working so great now. Has he built up an immunity to it this quickly? There's no way.

Izuku falls onto the couch after having AINA submit his bullshit essay, not even caring that he's still in his clothes. He can still smell the faint iron scent in his nose and rubs at it, flaking away some of the blood still caked on the inside.

Maybe he *doesn't* have a good hold on *Extract* or One for All.

Maybe he is still going to struggle with the pain, with the aching, the sickness, the itch—

Izuku scratches absently at his wrist, noting the new scars that cover the sides of his hand. He didn't break any bones beside his leg this time, but Recovery Girl had made sure to tell him after Tsukauchi left that even with the Nomu having a shock absorption quirk, he shouldn't have used One for All continuously the way he did, especially not at full power. If he keeps this up, he's going to have

nerve damage.

Which sounds metal, but also really, really troublesome.

Sick, cloying panic starts to creep up the back of his throat the longer he thinks about his mistakes today.

He wasn't fast enough, nor was he smart enough. His slip-ups were accidents that he could have easily prevented, but also could have been severely hurt by. No, that doesn't matter. His *friends* could have been severely hurt by them.

Aizawa was. So was Thirteen. All Might just barely managed to keep his secret safe. They all almost *died.*

Izuku's counter to the Nomu's attack could have killed him, and Izuku still remembers the haunted look in the creature's eyes when it realized something was different after its brain had been sliced open. That its regeneration wasn't the same anymore, that it couldn't do the things it was most definitely trained to do. It almost looked, dare Izuku say, scared. Izuku thinks about when he fought beside Aizawa before the whole Nomu thing went down, and he remembers the obvious worry the man had shown when Izuku was in the middle of dodging a nasty blow to the throat.

People shouldn't have to be afraid of a hero. Nor should they have to worry about them.

Heroes should be reassuring and comforting simply by existing, like how All Might was when he smashed into the USJ to save them. His mere presence was like a gift from the heavens; a promise of survival. Heroes should be comforting like how Present Mic was when he woke Izuku up from that nightmare at the laundromat that day. They should be like how Eraserhead *continues* to be with every single meeting he's had with Rabbit: an anchor. A lifeline. For Izuku has been navigating uncharted waters for the majority of his life, and having something there to tether him to the ground, to bring him back to reality—it's something he's never dared to hope for, even in his most childish dreams.

Izuku doesn't have that same effect around people. And sure, he's not a hero yet, never will be, but he should at least be able to make people stop worrying. It seems that all he manages to do is screw up, though.

Take today for example. He used his quirks. He does that sometimes

as Rabbit, but only when he's sure nobody can see or remember it correctly. This time is different, however. Mineta and Tsuyu must have seen it. Aizawa was there, too. Whether or not he was conscious enough to really see it is debatable, but the chance is still there, and it's still too strong.

And his knife. He took out a dangerous, undocumented support weapon and used it during the battle. Again, Izuku isn't sure Aizawa actually processed that little detail, as they had more pressing matters to deal with at the time, but still.

He's made so many mistakes in just the past few hours that he wants to scream. He wants to hit something. Maybe himself. He wants to go after Shigaraki and his father and fucking *show* them why targeting his school, his mentor, is a bad idea. Is, not was, because Izuku knows that this won't be the only time this happens.

Maybe it's Izuku's fault and maybe it isn't, but all the boy knows is that he's angry in a way he hasn't been in for a long, long time, and he's starting to think that maybe UA isn't the best place for him after all. His previous reasons for not applying were valid. He sees that now. He worried that attending this school would put everyone in danger, and he was right.

Kacchan will hate me if I drop out. Maybe if I can find a subtle way to get expelled or something I'll have a better excuse.

It shouldn't be too hard with Aizawa as his teacher. The man would probably expel him for breathing too heavily. Izuku knows the best ways to piss him off, too, so he should be golden.

But the more Izuku starts to think, the more his mind wanders to the unimportant things. He thinks of the criminals Shigaraki most definitely hired as a distraction, the ones that are now sitting in jail.

They were willing to hurt Izuku. They were willing to kill him and all of the other students—mere *children.* And for what? A few hundred bucks each? Or was it more than that? They probably just wanted a chance to brag about the fact that they got to work with the new League of Villains.

Those aren't just criminals in Izuku's mind anymore. They're *monsters.* He knows, logically, that they must have their own reasons for being so cold and bloodthirsty, but he can't find it in himself to care. Who knows how many of his classmates they would've killed had they been given the chance?

He thinks once again about their faces, about how some of them even seemed *familiar* to him. As if he's seen them before in passing or on patrol.

Or maybe even at the Club.

The anger bubbles up inside him again, and Izuku turns on his side to glare at the wall. The couch is as uncomfortable as always, but the slight pain helps with giving him something to focus on. Missy jumps up and curls into his chest, and Izuku forces the tension out of his body so he doesn't scare her. It's a good thing he's already fed her, as he doesn't think he has the energy to do much of anything right now other than glower.

The Club only has a few rules, and Izuku knows them by heart. He knows that harming anyone underage is not allowed under any circumstance. For a member of the Club to participate in something like the attack that occurred today? It would be a violation of the agreement everyone was forced to sign upon becoming a member. And Izuku is sure he recognized some of those faces at the USJ, and he's *also* sure that there are a couple others who must have known about the attack before it happened, and thus failed to say anything about it. Which is *also* a violation.

Professionals have standards, even if they're criminals. Not saying something is the same as committing the crime yourself, at least in this situation. At least when it involves children.

Oh, he's going to have a *fun* time with those select few. All he has to do is go through the police's files on the villains they arrested today and connect the dots. What he's going to do to them is simple, pleasing, and nothing if not justified.

Another wave of pain wracks through him, and Izuku starts to cough up another mixture of saliva and crimson, scaring Missy to the point where she nearly scratches him in her alarm.

Fuck. He's glad that school is canceled tomorrow. He doesn't think this is going to get better by morning.

Yeah, I should've taken its quirk.

The Nomu isn't alive, but at the same time it is. It was by pure chance that he didn't end up taking it—an accident, in all honesty, but a dire mistake all the same.

And now he’s paying for it.

Chapter End Notes

if our asscracks were horizontal instead of vertical they’d clap when we walk down the stairs

f

waiting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day passes by much quicker than he would've hoped.

Students were given the day off from school since they all nearly died, which means Izuku has nothing else to do but research more on the attack and go out patrolling. It's a Thursday, which means he's supposed to go over to Kacchan's house for dinner tonight, but Izuku can't bring himself to actually interact with anyone right now. His nerves are shot, and he can barely focus on anything besides the work laid out in front of him.

His blond friend has been texting him nonstop since Izuku told him he wouldn't be able to make it, and while Izuku is glad Kacchan cares, each *ping* of his phone makes him want to rip out his hair.

He ends up silencing it, telling AINA to only patch through messages from his clients or Eraserhead.

Izuku is happy that he and his friend are back on speaking terms, of course, it just sucks that it had to be a villain fight that brought them back together.

Patrol was busy this morning. News of the incident made national headlines, and the League's daring attack on the best heroics school in Japan seemed to have inspired many other criminals and villains to act out.

He unfortunately had to cut his patrol short, however, due to a random local hero chasing him halfway into the city. This is why Izuku is currently at home right now, the sun's last rays peeking in through the broken balcony windows as he finishes up on his new prototype ring. The one he has on now isn't working the way he wanted it to anymore, and he can't exactly pop five of those pills to stop the symptoms from appearing again, so a new ring is a must. All he needs for it is a few more materials and then he should hopefully be set.

No more impromptu vomit or bloody coughs. He can pretend nothing bad is happening and just move on, just like how he's been doing with everything.

He has to perfect his USJ journal before going out for another patrol. His character analysis for each criminal and student is done, so now a quick rewatch of all the footage is due, just for Izuku to see if he missed anything.

Missy comes and sits on his keyboard halfway through, not moving until Izuku goes to pick her some catnip off the plant in his bedroom —if he stole the potted plant from one of the Home Decor stores during his patrol today, well, nobody but the store manager has to know.

He jots down little notes and bullet points here and there, sipping on the leftover cold coffee he made that morning. He's going to give the journal to Aizawa tomorrow, as he's sure the man isn't gonna let any amount of injuries stop him from teaching. He'll be at school for sure.

It's only right for Izuku to share his knowledge. This isn't some petty gang or something—this is about the League of Villains. This is about the attack that nearly killed three teachers and twenty students. He has no choice but to tell them.

The only thing he's leaving out from the journal is information about All for One. Only briefly did he mention how a higher person must be operating from behind the curtains and pulling the strings. Shigaraki Tomura is a man-child, so there's no way he's the one making the major decisions. Izuku wishes he could tell them everything he knows without screwing things up, but unfortunately it just doesn't seem to be the right way to go.

He's kind of dreading tomorrow. He doesn't want to imagine the look on Aizawa's face when he gets handed the notebook.

Izuku sits back in his rolling chair and spins around, chewing on the tip of his pen as he thinks. Missy is curled up on the back of the couch with her paws tucked neatly into her chest, eyes half-lidded as she stares at him. She is most definitely judging him, even while slightly high off catnip.

Kurogiri said during the attack that he was practically given the information about the teachers' schedules and plans, which means that there was someone privy to that information beforehand. As far as Izuku knows, there have been no security breaches at UA besides the gate incident that happened during lunch—and also besides the boy's own personal endeavors, of course, but that hardly counts.

The point is that UA wasn't hacked. This information must've been

passed on to Kurogiri in one form or another. The warp villain is usually very specific; his word choice is always delicate. He was most likely *given* it, so he didn't take it. Stealing isn't the way he normally goes anyway.

The existence of a traitor is the most probable theory that's answering the question blooming at the back of Izuku's mind. It would make the most sense, but this theory is born of fear, not evidence. Izuku has a feeling there are more details that he's missing, more variables that he has yet to figure out.

It has to be someone on the outside looking in, right? Rather than someone already inside?

Izuku doesn't even want to think about the possibility of a traitor, because that would mean all the staff at UA would need to be labeled as suspects until proven otherwise. The chances of it being a student are low, though not impossible. Missing files or glitches in the system are easy enough to explain or debunk, so a student traitor is still on the table. There are things they could learn or gain information to that they could just write off as accidental eavesdropping or curiosity to anyone who asks them about it.

It could be any teacher or student in any course, though the Heroics course is the most likely. And *boy* does that thought not sit well with Izuku.

Could be one of my classmates. One of my friends. Hell, even one of my own teachers.

The word *traitor* leaves a nasty taste in Izuku's mouth, and the boy tries to swallow it down. He starts to write down the basic points of the theory in his notebook. He may not like it so much, but he still has to write down potential suspects to fully explore the idea. He has to flesh out all of the potential variables.

He still thinks it has to be something else though. A traitor seems almost too easy—too obvious. All for One orchestrated the attack, that much is clear, so he wouldn't leave his tracks this clear for anybody to follow. Especially when he probably already knew Izuku would be there. Of all people, All for One should know that Izuku won't stop searching until he finds the answer.

It's too easy, but it's still a plausible theory. If it's not a traitor, then what's the answer? How did his father even know about the schedules or the trip to the USJ without breaking through UA's security?

Sure, Izuku does it all the time, but he isn't dumb. He knows he leaves behind some sort of a trace when he does it. He knows that if one were to specifically look for it, they would find that someone's been tampering with their walls. Izuku *has* looked, and no one besides himself and Principal Nezu has been playing around with UA's online systems, meaning Kurogiri isn't lying. He was *given* that information. And said info must have been learned through eye-and-ear only.

So is there really a traitor at UA, or is it just a case of *at the wrong place at the wrong time?* Perhaps there's a spy lurking from outside the gates? Bugs implanted in the teacher's offices? An unwilling or even unknowing traitor?

The possibilities seem to be endless. God, this is so—so *frustrating.*

Izuku flicks his pen out of his mouth and lodges it into the wall, scowling when it just misses the bullseye. He painted a sort of dartboard on a section of the wall just next to his door a few weeks ago. He hasn't had the opportunity to shoot a gun in a while, so he painted the board to help practice his aim, even if it's not nearly the same.

Missy meows, having turned her head to watch the pen just miss the inner circle of the red section. It sounds like she's making fun of him.

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up!" Izuku pulls out another pen and turns to the next page of his analysis. He needs to finish this in the next hour if he wants to be able to go out patrolling again.

He hopes he's not making a mistake in his decision to hand his notes over to Aizawa.

Izuku isn't late, but it's a close thing. Three minutes before the last bell rings the boy is hurrying through the nearly empty hallways and up the stairs. Elevators take too long, in his own fine opinion.

He doesn't bother fixing his tie as he skids to a halt in front of the door.

Not late, but he might as well be with how everyone stops and stares at him when he walks in.

And that's... new. Nobody's ever done that before. Not here.

He heard them talking with each other when he was walking past the other classrooms, so why did they quiet down when he walked in? Were they talking about him?

Every single person in the room is staring at him, even Kacchan. The blond doesn't have the same look in his eye, though. He's glaring at Izuku as if he's annoyed, which is normal. The others are more skeptical. *Wary.*

They look almost scared. But of what?

Izuku keeps his head down, staring at his shoes as he walks quickly to his seat. His neck prickles with the attention, ears turning a nice shade of red. Why are they acting like that? What did he do to them?

What didn't you do? That snide voice says, almost making him stumble into the side of Kacchan's desk as he passes.

"Watch it, nerd!"

Izuku barely hears him, too busy trying to calm the sudden anxiety boiling in the pit of his stomach. *Did I do something wrong?*

He grips his backpack tightly as he sits down, staring at the back of Kacchan's head as if his friend will save him. The conversations start to pick back up, but it's quieter this time. More careful. He doesn't miss the glances being thrown his way every few seconds.

Izuku hates how just a few actions can reduce him to this pathetic, anxiety-ridden mess.

A punch to the shoulder brings him back to reality. "That's for skipping out on last night," Kacchan hisses. He's turned around in his chair, eyes blazing with the promise of revenge. "You owe me now."

Izuku sighs, knuckles turning white from how hard he's gripping the backpack in his lap. "Sure, Kacchan. What do you—"

"So drink this."

Huh? Izuku stares at the energy drink his friend shoved into his chest, blinking in surprise. He looks up, still confused, only to flinch back

when Kacchan is suddenly a few centimeters from his face. “What the hell!”

“You look like you just crawled out of a fucking dumpster fire, Shitku.“ His eyes narrow. “And what’s with the eyebags? The old lady told ya to get some damn sleep.”

Izuku matches Kacchan’s expression. “I *have* been sleeping, thanks. Worry about yourself; you don’t look too hot either.”

Kacchan would’ve hit Izuku with the can of energy juice had the boy not ducked just in time. “Drink it or I’ll shove it down your throat.”

Izuku rolls his eyes but opens the drink anyway. He *does* need it, if he’s being honest. He hasn’t gotten a wink of sleep since he woke up in Recovery Girl’s office, and that was over twenty-four hours ago. Besides, he needs something to distract himself from the obvious change in his classmates’ actions.

Everyone is bound to be closer to their classmates now that they’ve survived a villain attack together, and Izuku knows that they’re probably going to be warier and more on edge than before, but to avoid him completely? Izuku knows he’s done something wrong.

Kacchan scowls again. “I better see you eat something at lunch. You look dead.”

“Only on the inside,” Izuku mutters, having to dodge yet another whack to the head.

He’s halfway through the drink when he gathers the courage to look around. There’s less than a minute before the bell. Aizawa should be here any second. He’s never been late to any of his classes before and definitely won’t break that now.

Izuku notices a certain feeling of *emptiness* behind him and frowns, glancing back to see that the seat behind him is empty. He should’ve known things were too quiet. The lack of crude jokes and unwanted groping of the girls should have been proof of that.

Did Mineta get expelled?

Familiar energy spikes from the hallway, and Izuku straightens up and downs the rest of the can in one gulp, stuffing the drink in his backpack just before the door clicks open.

The students immediately go silent, and Izuku feels a few more stares at the back of his neck. Fuck, can they quit that already? Do they realize how obvious they're being?

"Morning," Aizawa says, as monotone as always. His arms are covered in bandages and held in slings, though his face doesn't look much better. The only thing you can see besides the medical tape is dark eyes peeking through the white.

The class immediately explodes.

"You're back already, Aizawa-sensei?" That sounds like Yaoyorozu.

"What an undeniable pro," Kirishima whispers in awe.

Izuku frowns, slightly surprised that no one else saw this coming. Did they really think a villain attack would stop Aizawa from doing his job? The man who hasn't called out or been late to work even once?

The underground hero doesn't care. To him, his health isn't important. And holy *fuck* does Izuku want to call him out on that bullshit. How many times has Eraserhead lectured him on taking care of himself during patrol? How many times has he embarrassed Izuku by scolding him in front of the latest Villain of the Week for being careless with his health?

Iida's hand shoots in the air despite everyone else not bothering to doing so. "Glad to see you doing well, sensei!"

"If you can call that doing well," Uraraka mutters, eyeing the wide expanse of bandages covering the man's face.

Izuku agrees with her, and it takes all of his willpower not to glare at the man. *You dumb fucking hypocrite.*

"My welfare isn't important." Aizawa wobbles as he moves to stand behind the podium. "And before we begin, I'm sure most of you have noticed the empty seat in class today." All of the girls have, no doubt. The teacher continues with a slight tremor to his body. "Mineta has dropped out of UA, and no, I will not be answering any further questions on that because I don't care."

Izuku doesn't blame Mineta for leaving. He was kind of cowardice from the beginning, not to mention handsy. Is it bad that Izuku is kind of glad he's gone? Sure it sucks that he had to leave because of a traumatic experience, but he *was* a pervert. Aizawa would've expelled

him anyway sooner or later if he kept up that kind of attitude towards the girls.

“But back on topic.” The class quiets down from their hushed whispering. “Your fight is far from over, so don’t get too excited.”

“Our fight?” Kacchan echoes gruffly.

Oh no. Izuku thinks he knows what Aizawa is talking about.

Kaminari groans from his place across the room. “Don’t tell me there’s more villains?”

I might just actually die if that’s the case.

“UA’s Sports Festival is fast approaching.”

And oh. Oh *fuck.*

Izuku had completely forgotten about that. It’s held every year, one for each grade, and it gives students from all courses a chance to shine and make a name for themself.

Which means the entire class is going to be in the spotlight. Something that Izuku *definitely* doesn’t need.

The rest of the students gasp and cry about how they finally have something normal to look forward to, and all the while Izuku is sitting in his seat, back ramrod straight. He doesn’t think the principal will let him sit this one out, not without a good excuse, so he’s just gonna have to find another plan to account for this.

Maybe I should have AINA google ways to get expelled. I’ve gotta make it lowkey, though.

It’s Izuku’s turn to punch his friend when Kacchan flashes him a smug look, obviously aware of his latest dilemma.

“We just had that villain attack,” Kirishima starts. “Is this really the best idea?”

“It’s necessary to demonstrate that UA’s crisis management protocols are sound. At least, that’s the thinking behind it.” Aizawa tips his head forward, seeming to long for his sleeping bag. “Compared to past years, there’ll be five times the police presence. Anyhow, our Sports Festival is the greatest opportunity you’ll get here.”

Izuku begs to differ, but okay. He knows, logically, that the event would never have been canceled over just a few villains, no matter how dangerous the attack was. It's one of Japan's biggest national events, having taken the place of the Olympics in terms of popularity.

"The nation's top heroes will be watching, right?" Yaoyorozu asks, hand still raised in the air. "They'll be there as scouts!"

Kaminari looks suddenly excited as he turns to Jirou. "They'll be looking to hire us as sidekicks after we graduate! That's how it's done."

"And a lot of those sidekicks never manage to go solo," Jirou deadpans. "That'll be you, Kaminari, you dunce."

I think they'd be cute together.

Aizawa lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Naturally, you'll gain valuable experience and popularity if you're picked up by a big-name hero, but your time is limited. Show the pros what you're made of here, and you'll make futures for yourselves."

They have three years: three chances to put themselves into the spotlight.

But Izuku doesn't need that. He's working on a plan to get expelled as Aizawa speaks, and even *if* he wanted to continue training as a hero, he would go for a more underground approach. He's more suited for stealth than anything.

Would All Might approve of that? You're his successor. You're supposed to be in the public eye.

Damnit. Izuku works his jaw in frustration. He's stuck on what to do, that much is true, but what he *does* know is that he's in dire need of a nap to deal with all this rising bullshit. He's going to jump on that plan the moment he's given the chance.

Lunch comes quickly after modern literature, and Izuku is glued close

to Kacchan's side as they make their way out of the classroom. He can't quite share the enthusiasm of his classmates regarding the Sports Festival, as it's only going to cause him more problems. He's not very thrilled about the idea of attending. Hopefully he can get expelled before then.

Why did he bring his notebook along again? It's already finished, so he has no reason to carry it on him at lunch. He just has to give it to Aizawa after school.

"Hey, Deku!"

Kacchan drags him along quickly, not allowing Izuku a chance to stop and talk with Iida and Uraraka when they call him over.

They seem to be the only ones who want to talk to me. Everyone else is avoiding me.

"Kacchan, come on, you're making me look rude!" Izuku digs his heels into the waxed floors just to be difficult. "I need to talk to them."

"Not until I see you eat something for once, you idiot."

Izuku comes to a sudden halt when *Extract* warns him of another familiar presence walking his way.

"Jesus, stop resisting you broccoli fuck—"

All Might interrupts Kacchan's annoyed hiss by jumping out from a random hallway corner, signature grin ever-present on his shadowy face. "Young Midoriya," he booms, "is *here!"*

Izuku blinks, his mentor's loud words bouncing around inside his mind like an old DVD screensaver. He can only hope that every time the words hit the corner of his skull perfectly he'll experience a Big Brain moment.

"All Might? What are you doing here?" It's not that he's annoyed; he's just genuinely confused. Isn't this his break as well? Why is he still in his large form?

"I brought lunch!" The man says awkwardly. He holds up a bento box as if to show proof, eyes crinkling as his smile becomes more genuine. "Wanna eat with me?"

Golden retriever. That's what he is.

“He’s like a damn schoolgirl!” Kacchan yells, doubling over in laughter.

Izuku flushes and promptly kicks his friend in the back of the knee. The blond goes tumbling to the floor, still cackling. “Ah, sure!” Izuku says, rubbing his arm nervously out of habit.

He knows All Might has something important to say, saying as he’s ambushing Izuku right before lunch is supposed to start. And once the pair heads for the teacher’s lounge, leaving behind a smug Kacchan, it doesn’t take long for the boy to figure out what’s so important.

“Fifty minutes?” He chokes out, coughing up a piece of fried pork from the bento box they’re supposed to be sharing; All Might brought it solely for Izuku, though, that much is obvious. He can’t even eat most of the foods he put in there, so it’s only logical to assume he made it for Izuku. It would almost feel like one of their picnic days if not for the sudden heaviness in the air.

“Yes,” Small Might says, pouring tea into the fancy cups sitting on the table in front of them. “My time limit’s getting shorter by the day. As I said the other day, I can barely maintain my muscle form for an hour.”

So it really is that bad. Izuku thought so—he prepared himself for it. But actually hearing it come from his mentor’s mouth makes it seem more real. More final.

I should’ve been able to stop the Nomu. Then he wouldn’t have had to push himself over his time limit to fight it.

Is Izuku that weak that he couldn’t even put a stop to one of his father’s creations? He couldn’t even do one simple thing. He almost got Tsuyu killed. Aizawa and Thirteen almost died, too, all due to Izuku’s own stupid failures.

For the umpteenth time, Izuku is reminded of how weak he is.

“All Might, I’m so sorr—”

The hero spits up blood as he laughs, and he has to turn away to try and hide his chortles. “Don’t apologize, my boy! We’re so alike, you and I.”

Are we?

“What I really want to talk about is the Sports Festival. At what percent can you use One for All now?”

Izuku texted him last night about the increase in power he’s been experiencing lately regarding One for All. His quirks seem to be getting used to the suppressor he wears, so when Izuku tried it out during his early morning patrol today by aiming a punch at a wall, he was mildly surprised at the much harsher kickback he received in return.

“Uh, maybe twenty percent at the moment of impact? A little less than that?” He holds out his right hand and runs a finger along the faint scars lining his knuckles. He probably shouldn’t have actually made contact with the wall while punching, at least not without proper protection, but whatever.

Izuku doesn’t mention how this new increase of strength is hurting him even worse than before.

“Well, that’s good to hear! I’ll have to see you test it out during class next week. But in the meantime, I think you should start focusing on trying to regulate it without your quirk suppressor, as it won’t always be there to help you.”

Izuku nods. He *does* understand. He knows that having his ring on for long periods of time will stunt his growth quirk-wise, but at the same time it’s a necessity for reasons that he won’t dare tell his mentor. “I’ve been trying,” he starts sheepishly. “I think I have a better image of what it’s like to control it, it’s just a little hard to maintain a certain input.”

It’s not a lie. On the few occasions Izuku *has* tried, the end result usually included cursing and more pain. Not to mention property damage and a small pile of blood on the floor. It doesn’t end well, to put it simply, and it’s not like Izuku can take off his ring long enough to truly test out One for All’s limits.

The quirk is like an ocean of energy, its waves constantly crashing against Izuku’s mind and pushing and pulling at his skin. What his suppressor is doing is making a sort of pool that allows him to take what power he wants from it without the threat of damaging himself. He doesn’t have to worry about drowning underneath the ocean’s waves.

It’s a temporary fix, one that’s becoming more evident by the day as Izuku loses what little control he already has over it. Some of that

ocean is spilling over into his pool, and it's going to cause the dam to break eventually.

“That’s progress, in any case.” Small Might’s expression darkens slightly. “I’m sure you’re already aware, but the time I’ve got left as the Symbol of Peace is quickly running out. And among those with villainous intent, there are some who have started to realize that.”

Izuku does not like where this is going. This is exactly what he was stressing over during homeroom.

“I granted you my power so that you could succeed me,” his mentor continues. “This Sports Festival—it’s an event the whole country’ll be watching! And that means just one thing for us!”

Us. The word weighs down on Izuku’s shoulder. They’re a team now. No, they have been for a while, Izuku just didn't let himself believe it before now.

“You. The next Pillar of Justice, the fledgling symbol,” he pokes Izuku in the chest to further accentuate the importance of what he’s saying. “I need you to tell the world *I am here.”*

It would be so easy to just say yes. It would be simple, almost, for Izuku to grin and excitedly spew his agreement, but the boy can’t make himself do it this time. There’s too much at stake, too many thoughts making his mind feel fuzzy.

Izuku doesn’t know how to feel about this, and yet he finds himself nodding anyway.

By the time half of the bento box is empty and their conversation is close to done, with Small Might insisting that Izuku take the leftover lunch with him in case he gets hungry in the future, there are around fifteen minutes before the next class period.

Izuku shows his mentor a few pictures of Missy before he leaves, making sure to include the ones that’ll embarrass Kacchan the most—

one of Missy sitting on top of the blond's spiky hair without a care in the world, another of Missy resting directly on his face while he's trying to sleep, and a funnier one of Missy hissing at Kacchan as the teen attempts to climb up the refrigerator to stop her from pushing off a small vase of flowers.

His social battery having been drained for the day, Izuku only has one option upon leaving the teacher's lounge.

The vents.

He doesn't want to interact with anyone, and there's still time before next period. He doesn't want to go back to the lunchroom, either. His best bet? Snooping around in the vents.

Izuku glances around quickly to make sure no one's watching him before powering up *Boost* to jump up the wall to his left. He grabs onto the nearest hatch and swings himself up exactly like he had the first time around, only this time he does it with more confidence.

He starts to crawl around the vents for the second time, mentally sketching out a map inside his mind. It won't hurt to know all of the entrances and exits to each room in the building, as it might be useful later. He only managed to look at a little bit of the school when he first came here to get his arm healed, so now's the perfect opportunity to complete his layout.

He squeezes past a tight corner and stops suddenly, his palm touching something soft. Looking down, he realizes that he's stumbled upon a nest of some sort. Multiple blankets and very expensive-looking pillows cover the ground and the side of the vent's walls, and Izuku feels a frown tug at his lips. What kind of critter is using this space? And why would it have a nest with a miniature chess set off to the side?

Izuku stops himself from investigating further. There's only one creature this nest could belong to, and if he's right in his guess, he definitely doesn't want to upset him by touching his stuff. But even despite that, Izuku can't help but feel kind of irritated. This area of the vents is his now. Maybe he should go back later and move just a *few* pillows to show his superiority.

His notebook presses uncomfortably into his side as he crawls, and the boy realizes thoughtfully that his allergies aren't acting up this time around. It's clean in here; no more thin layer of dust clinging to the stainless steel like the last time he did this. Did someone clean it up

for him? No, that's not possible. Nobody even knows he does this. It must have been for the other resident vent gremlin. Okay, he has to be right. Izuku is willing to bet that it's—

"Midoriya."

Izuku startles so bad that the top of his head bangs against the vent's ceiling. Fuck. That's the second time in as many adventures. He covers his mouth before the *ow!* can escape him, freezing like a deer caught in headlights. He knows that voice.

He also knows whose classroom he's over right now.

The boy clears his throat awkwardly, voice echoing down the tunnel. "Uh, yes, sensei?"

Aizawa sounds exasperated when he replies from below. "Get out of the vents, please."

How? How did he even know it was Izuku? Is he that suspicious? That loud?

Izuku swings open the hatch after a moment's hesitation and drops to the floor with practiced ease. The notebook falls from his pocket and lands on the ground with a flop, making Izuku's face turn beet red as he locks eyes with his teacher. Aizawa is leaning against the wall on the floor, covered up to his elbows in his sleeping bag. Which begs the question: how did he manage to zip it up with his bandaged arms?

Izuku suddenly has this hilarious image of his teacher trying to grab hold of the zipper while in casts and pulling it up. Another thought enters his brain: how is he going to get the zipper *down?* Is he going to squirm a bunch like an actual caterpillar until he's released from his cocoon?

The boy gasps inwardly. Maybe his partner did it for him. That would support Izuku's idea that the hero's lover is at this school and actually —

Aizawa raises a brow, and when Izuku shakes himself from his ramblings he sees his teacher staring at him expectantly. Oh shit.

He coughs into his hand. "Sorry, sir, can you repeat that?"

Aizawa sighs. "I asked why you were in the vents."

Hm. Now that is a very good question, one that Izuku can't really answer without seeming like a cryptid. "I was just thinking?"

The caterpillar is unimpressed. "You can't think on the ground? Or maybe in the lunchroom? Which," he glances at the clock on the back wall, "is where you're supposed to be right now."

Haha, *fuck.*

Izuku scrambles for something to say. He can't exactly tell him that he had lunch with All Might, that would be weird. And plus, Aizawa doesn't care for the number one hero at all, so Izuku bringing him up would only further irritate him.

Well, I do need a reason to get expelled. Maybe I should do that.

After a moment's hesitation where Kacchan's face pops up threateningly in Izuku's mind, the boy hastily bends down to pick up his notebook and hand it to his teacher, deciding that this is as good a time as ever to hand it to him—only to freeze halfway, arm still outstretched in horror as he realizes what he's done.

Aizawa can't hold it.

Izuku retracts his hand instantly and instead places the journal on top of Aizawa's desk, not meeting the glare that the man is so obviously giving him.

Aizawa glances between him and the journal, not making any more movements than he has to. "Why're you giving me that?"

"Um, well." Okay, maybe he should've worked on an explanation before he came to school today. That would've been the smart thing to do. "It's my analysis. On the attack."

Aizawa stares at him for a solid ten seconds before replying, words slow, as if not quite believing Izuku's words. "Your analysis."

Izuku nods shakily, fidgeting with his fingers behind his back. *Please don't make me feel dumb, please don't make me feel dumb, please don't—*

"You are aware that I didn't assign your class anything like this?"

Izuku jolts forward. "No, I know! I just did it because I thought it would be, uh, you know," he bites the inside of his cheek, praying that he won't come off as pretentious, "useful?"

Aizawa hums and leans forward, moving his arms to sweep the journal off the desk. It falls open on his sleeping-bag-covered lap, and it takes every last bit of Izuku's strength not to make a joke about how he just looked like Squidward on that one episode of Spongebob.

Making a joke like that is something Rabbit would do, not Izuku.

He shifts on his feet, glancing longingly at the vents above. "There's, uh, notes on every criminal that was there, along with what quirks they have and which zones they were put in."

Aizawa gives a slight tilt of his head when he looks back up at the boy. "You do this stuff for fun?"

I did at first, Izuku almost says, snapping his mouth shut just in time. *Why the hell did I just think that?* "It's more of a hobby," he settles on. A hobby that's detrimental to his survival, but a hobby nonetheless.

Aizawa nods, seeming to accept the answer. "I'll review it. Thank you for sharing it with me."

Izuku bows quickly in acknowledgment, trying to escape from the classroom so he doesn't have to be in the suffocating presence of his homeroom teacher any longer. He's scary when he's like this. Izuku can't see his face, so spotting his tells is a lot harder than before. He can't get a good read on him at the moment.

"Hold it," Aizawa says when Izuku makes for the door. "I was planning on having this discussion with you later, but you're already here, so let's get this over with."

Izuku freezes, panic gripping his heart like icy claws at the ominous words. *There's no way he knows.*

The boy swallows, trying to force his face into one of indifference. He can't freak out or act suspiciously on the off chance that this isn't what he thinks it's about. "Sir?"

Aizawa nods toward his desk. "Check the first drawer."

Confused and a little scared, Izuku obeys. He knows Aizawa doesn't like to be kept waiting for long. He has thin patience on the best of days, and he obviously doesn't look like he's had the greatest time lately.

Izuku blinks at the glint of metal that greets him, frown deepening. It's

his knife. The one he had during the attack—the twin of the blade he has inside his right shoe right now.

“Tsukauchi told me one of his officers picked it up just outside the entrance to the USJ. Now, I specifically remember you using it as you fought those villains. You wielded it very comfortably, in fact.”

It’s not phrased like a question, but Izuku hears what he’s getting at anyway. “It’s not mine, sensei.” His voice is silky smooth; innocent but also intrigued. Is it enough to fool Aizawa, though? “I was fighting the criminals and one of them dropped it. I thought it would help me if I used it, and it did.”

“Uh-huh,” the underground hero grunts. That alone tells Izuku that he does *not* believe him in the slightest, but since he has no actual proof of anything happening otherwise, he can’t do anything about it. “Which brings me to my other point.” His eyes narrow, and the sudden change in topic almost gives Izuku whiplash. “You disobeyed a direct order of mine when I told you to get back, Midoriya.”

Izuku’s ears burn at the familiar nickname, not liking the tone Aizawa is using. He’s been lectured by the man before, but he never seems to be able to get used to it, not as Rabbit *or* as Izuku. “I was just doing what I thought was best, sensei. I had the opportunity to help, so I... took it.”

“So I figured. But what you need to understand is that when I tell you to do something, especially when we’re in the middle of a *villain attack,”* his words grow sharper near the end, “I expect you to listen. In order to be a hero, you must first be able to follow orders. That kind of recklessness is what gets people killed on the field, Midoriya.”

Fuck. His throat tightens on its own accord. It’s kind of unfair, Izuku thinks childishly, that he’s being lectured for helping, but at the same time he understands. Okay, so he could’ve had a better plan, whatever. He can admit that much at least. But it’s over, right? Izuku's inability to follow orders or whatever doesn't matter right now.

He just barely stops himself from arguing with his teacher’s reasonings, instead forcing himself to tell Aizawa that he understands. His gaze is fixed on a point on the wall beside the man, as he’s afraid he won’t be able to hide his frustration if he looks directly at him. He’s only a *little* ashamed. He doesn’t regret it. How could he?

The only thing he regrets is not being fast enough. Not *knowing.*

“English will start soon, so you can either go back to lunch or stay here.” Aizawa slides to the floor, Izuku’s notebook falling as well. “I don’t care which you choose, just don’t wake me up.”

And then he closes his eyes and is dead to the world. Izuku briefly considers asking him if he can have his knife back but snuffs out that request immediately.

Just because he kind of *needs* to get expelled doesn’t mean he’s going to make a fool out of himself. It’s illegal for him to have it; he’s not getting it back.

Izuku ends up staying in class instead of scoping through the vents again, and it’s not long before the rest of the students trail back in and Present Mic ambles his way through the door, voice loud enough to give Izuku another migraine.

But despite this, the last few periods of the day are slightly more bearable than the first few. Nobody is giving him sidelong glances anymore or outright avoiding him, so that’s nice. It’s when the day ends, however, that things take a turn for the worse.

Izuku is first aware of something different happening a minute or so after the last bell rings. The large number of quirks buzzing just behind the door instead of milling about in the hallways or empty classrooms is proof enough of that, but then they don’t *leave.* Izuku hangs back as Uraraka opens the door, only to be met with a huge crowd of students huddling close around the opening.

They all look hungry as they peer at Izuku’s classmates as if they’re animals in a zoo exhibit. The crowd is so thick that nobody can get through them without shoving, so Uraraka and the rest of Izuku's classmates stand there awkwardly.

And Izuku is already tired. He’s already had to deal with enough bullshit today as it is, so his irritation levels are spiking with each passing second. Izuku has a plan he was going to follow after school. The more in-depth files on the villains from the USJ are located at the police station on the other side of town, and Izuku needs to get ahold of them if he wants to connect those faces to gangs or other groups. He needs to *see* those documents, and since they haven’t been recorded virtually yet, he’ll have to find a way in there himself.

He already has a pretty good idea of what he’s going to do after getting home, but that plan revolves around having time. Time that’s currently being wasted with each passing second that he can’t get

through this crowd.

“What’s going on?” Uraraka asks, facing the sea of other unfamiliar students.

“They’re scoping out the competition, duh,” Kacchan says from in front of Izuku. “‘Cause we’re the kids who survived a villain attack.”

Just great. Why today, of all days? Why does it have to be when he actually has things to do after school?

“It makes sense they’d want a look before the Sports Festival,” Izuku mutters sourly.

Kacchan grunts, surprisingly having heard him. “No point, though.” He turns his fiery gaze onto the students. “Move it, extras!”

Izuku smiles to himself as Iida starts to frantically chop the air and lecture the blond. “Can we please not resort to calling those we don’t even know *extras?”*

“It’s true,” a lilac-haired boy starts, looming over the rest of the crowd with his tall build. Izuku straightens up immediately, something about the way the student is talking that garners his attention. “We came to get a look, but you sure are modest. Are all the kids in the hero course like this one?”

Only the best ones, Izuku thinks.

Kacchan has death in his eyes, but the other boy speaks before the blond can get a chance to snap back. “Gotta say, I’m a little disillusioned if this is what you’re offering.” He rests a large hand at the nape of his neck, but it’s not out of discomfort, it’s more of a way to appear *more* comfortable. To scare others off. “Those of us who didn’t make the hero course are stuck in general studies and the other tracks. There’re quite a few of us, did you know that?”

Izuku did, but it’s not like he cares that much.

“Depending on the results of this sports festival, they might consider transferring us to the hero course. I understand the reverse is also possible for you.”

The meaning is heavy for the rest of the class, but Izuku knows better. This boy is just trying to intimidate them. His words hold value, sure, but it doesn’t change why he’s even sharing this to begin with. Izuku

starts to feel the first tendrils of cold flame rise up in his body, the taste of anger so rare on his tongue that he almost doesn't recognize it a first.

Is this kid really trying to stir up competition after what happened two days ago? Does he even know what really went down inside the USJ?

"And scoping out the competition? For a general studies kid like me, this'll be the perfect chance to knock you off your pedestals." *Pedestals.* As if everyone here didn't earn their seat. As if everyone here didn't almost die during an attack that never should have happened. "Consider this a declaration of war."

War. *War.*

Izuku blanches, traitorous thoughts worming their way into his mind at the word. He's reminded of static eyes and hot breath near his ear, of large hands on his shoulders and burn marks on his back.

"No matter what corner of the world you're in, Izuku, there will always be fighting. There will always be people who are lost in their own illusions and false realities. You must learn that this is just how things are. You have to embrace this violence."

This boy is talking as if there isn't already a war. Class 1-A fought it in just two days ago. Izuku's been fighting that same violence for *ages,* not wanting to succumb to it. Why can't anyone else see that? Why are they so focused on themselves?

"This is the price you pay for personal freedom."

Another student steps forward this time, and *Extract* practically purrs. The feeling of this quirk is similar to Izuku's own, which is quite unsettling. But what's more unsettling are the words that come out of the blond's mouth.

"You guys should be grateful those villains attacked you, really." His voice is obnoxious; Izuku finds his hands curling into fists at the grating sound. "Your class is plastered all over the news. Everyone and their mother knows your names by now!"

The flame is a scalding fire now, and it's burning up Izuku's insides. Is he *jealous?* Is that what he's saying? No. He's just trying to rile them up, that's all. He must have his own reasons for acting like this, Izuku knows. He can't fault him too much.

“But I have to say, I’m surprised you all made it! Your class doesn’t look very promising. You should be proud.”

Sarcasm. A simple trick used to throw an opponent off track and get them blinded. It’s not meant to be taken seriously. It’s not meant to be making Izuku feel *this fucking cold.*

But even as he tells himself this, the anger grows bigger. It turns his thoughts black and his mind cruel. His palms feel slightly sticky, either from his nails pressing too deeply into his skin or from nervous sweat, he can’t tell. All Izuku can see is the image of Aizawa’s broken body in a miniature crater on the ground. He blinks and sees Thirteen’s partially destroyed suit, Tsuyu’s wide eyes as his brother’s hand reached toward her face—

“I don’t think almost dying gives us bragging rights,” Izuku says quietly from behind Kacchan.

Everything goes still. The quiet is absolute. Izuku realizes with a sharp intake of breath that everyone is staring at him now, Kacchan now moving to the side so Izuku is given a chance to speak. His friend knows how he feels about this sort of thing, that’s the only reason he did it.

I didn’t mean to say that aloud.

Even his classmates have turned around to look at him, most of them looking confused and shocked. He doesn’t blame them. Izuku is skilled at going unnoticed, even when he’s right in the middle of it all.

“Eh? Sorry, I couldn't hear you,” the blond says, looking over at him. The fake sweetness to his words is making Izuku sick.

Another bully. I thought I left that behind when I joined a school for heroes.

Kacchan shoots daggers at the boy with his eyes, but Izuku lightly pushes his friend with a hand, telling him it’s alright.

“I’m just saying,” Izuku says, not bothering to raise his voice above the soft tone he’s using. “We almost died. Our *teacher* almost died, just like that, trying to protect us from a monster created to destroy All Might. I don’t see how that can possibly be turned into something positive.”

The blond is momentarily taken aback, mouth still curled into a smile

that looks just a little more hesitant now. Izuku's words are filled with poison, acid seeping out of them from the edges.

He turns his gaze onto the lilac-haired boy, who had unsuccessfully tried to blend back in with the crowds. He's not talking either, but his eyes are more than expressive enough for Izuku to tell that he's thinking about something. That he's angry. He hates them—the entire hero course.

But now that Izuku can see him fully, now that he can note the eye bags dark enough to rival Izuku's own and the set to the boy's jaw and the overall *exhausted* look on his face—he knows not to take what he said personally. He recognizes the glint in those lavender eyes because he sees it in himself every time he looks in the mirror in the morning.

The self-doubt. The hatred. The anxiety and fear you feel when surrounded by others, even if you know you're the one in control, even if you know you'll come out on top if put against them.

It's all too familiar, and Izuku *understands.*

He lets his gaze slide back over to the blond's before finishing up. He's already sick of the attention. He doesn't like the way they're gaping at him—he knows he doesn't look too hot right now.

"If you hear about a class of students getting attacked by villains and immediately start whining about them receiving public recognition, then that's your own issues speaking." Izuku shifts on his feet and lifts a shoulder in a quick shrug. "I think *you* should be grateful you weren't there. A copycat quirk like yours wouldn't have done anything against that creature."

A moment of stunned silence, and then: "Wait, how did you—!"

Izuku moves to push past them, but it seems like he doesn't have to. The crowd makes way for him slowly as he moves along, and he can feel their stares like a hot iron on his back. He clutches his backpack tighter and glares at the ground.

They're whispering about him now, and they're not even trying to hide it. Izuku cringes in on himself when he catches a few of the words.

"That's the kid who fought it, right?"

"What did Kan-sensei call it? The Nomu?"

“Is that the one that had to be carried out?”

“Scary. Did you see his eyes?”

Oh. It seems so much clearer now. Izuku shuts his eyes tight and prays that muscle memory will get him to the stairs. They’re scared of him because he fought the Nomu. They’re scared because he nearly killed it. They’re scared because he *survived* it.

Only a few students were there to witness it, but Izuku knows that rumors spread like wildfires. Mineta was probably responsible for most of that.

They’re scared of me.

He faintly hears Kacchan telling them all to fuck off, and then loud footsteps as the boy stomps after him. His body is a warm presence by his side, but when Izuku breathes it’s still a rush of cold air in and out of his lungs.

“How’d you know?” Kacchan asks lowly, looking at him from the corner of his eye.

Izuku thinks back to the other boy’s quirk, how *Extract* had immediately recognized their shared characteristics and energy. How it had acted like the cat that got the canary when it realized it now has a sibling from a long-lost parent. “Just call it a lucky guess.”

It wasn't too hard to put together. The boy was jealous; he was desperate and probably a little scared at being left behind. Forgotten. So it only made sense for the quirk to be a copy type, especially given by *Extract's* reaction. Mimicry is fear, after all. It's a defense mechanism.

But it can also be used to lure prey in.

Izuku can’t worry about that now, though. He has work to do.

Chapter End Notes

if you flick your nipple it gets hard in exactly seven seconds :))

u

sick thoughts

Chapter Notes

> I have no excuse for being late other than the fact that school is killing me and mha manga chapter 282 took a sledgehammer to my heart :))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's surprisingly easy to let yourself get caught by the police.

Izuku has to suppress an eye roll at the fearful looks some of the more experienced officers give him. He's basically turning himself in, after all. It's only natural for them to get suspicious.

"Put your hands up, now!"

"Do it, Rabbit!"

"Everyone else, get back!"

Izuku is standing in the middle of the street, face perfectly expressionless. Cops and pro heroes alike are surrounding him in a wide circle, obviously not wanting to get too close. It's kind of funny how scared some of them are; the darker, crueler side of Izuku can't help but preen at the knowledge.

"Show your damn hands!"

Oh. Demanding, aren't they? Izuku raises his arms above his head, letting out a loud, dramatic sigh. "Alright, I'm doing it. No need to break your dicks over it."

"Stay where you are!"

Or what? What are they going to do? Shoot him? He's not a very high-priority criminal. The worst thing they can do is shoot him with tranquilizers or knock him unconscious. Sure, he's caused a lot of property damage and made a fool of the government loads of times, but he's never done anything to warrant something like this.

The murder charges on his file are just that: charges. There's really no *evidence,* those are just legal claims against him. If there was even the *slightest* proof of him doing said activities, Endeavor would have been

coming after him from the very beginning. It seems Izuku's doing well in regards to avoiding the man, even now. With no flame hero in sight, his plan is practically golden.

A glint in the light catches his eye, and Izuku smiles beneath the mask when he sees a reporter trying to push through the line of cops and get some footage of him. He points finger guns at the camera and winks, just *knowing* that this stunt of his will make national headlines before the day's end.

He usually likes his name to stay local for obvious reasons, but if he can embarrass the Hero's Commission by doing something like this whilst also getting some important information out of it, he's going to do so a million times over, consequences be damned.

"Quit moving before we shoot! Last chance!"

Ooh, Izuku is just quivering in his boots. The tremble in the officer's voice really drives the fear home, too. But all jokes aside, why are they so scared of him? It's not like he hurts cops—well if you don't count the bruised egos he leaves them with. He only ever hurts criminals or people who genuinely deserve it, so he's not sure why they're so openly terrified.

It seems some might be starting some rumors about Rabbit to turn the people against me. Could it be the Commission? Or do they not care enough?

Whatever it is, that's not good. Not good at all.

One of the heroes bark at him to get on his knees, and Izuku has to bite back a dirty joke. Not yet. His sass will be put to good use in due time.

"Do it, now!"

Alright, fuck. They really don't want to drag this out. Oh well. That's fine with Izuku—the quicker the better, actually.

He does as he's told and rests his palms on the back of his head; an open invitation. For a moment, everything is still. There's a ripple in the circle, as nobody is quite willing to approach him just yet, but then Izuku flicks out an impatient hand to kickstart a reaction and multiple pro heroes are stepping forward without further prodding. They're new, he notices, having either just graduated last year or just now making their debut. That last part makes him laugh a little.

Imagine it's your first time in the public eye as a hero and your first task is to take in a wanted vigilante who's prone to surprise attacks and glitter bombs. Not to mention the fact that this entire thing is being recorded. Izuku is sure that the 'chase' that happened before this was caught on camera as well.

It's funny how something as simple as throwing a rock through a police officer's car windshield can lead to something like this. It's not like the cop was *inside* the car when he smashed the window, so he doesn't see the big deal. Nonetheless, it caused the reaction he needed to get here: face smushed against hot asphalt and arms held tightly behind his back as the heroes began the process of detainment.

"Take off his mask," someone says from the side, and it's like a switch flips inside the boy.

Yeah, that's not going to happen.

Izuku clicks his tongue. "Nope! Bad officer! Bad! I wouldn't do that unless you want your face blown off." The lie slips easily from his tongue. He prepared for this scenario long before he even picked up the rock, so it's not hard to make himself sound confident. "My mask is fingerprint-sensitive, which means if anyone else tries to touch it other than me, they're gonna set off a mini-explosion. I don't suppose you want to become a firecracker today, hm?"

The heroes around him fall silent, obviously debating whether or not they still want to go through with reaching for the mask, but after a moment they seem to think better of it.

"Won't that blow your own face off?" A hero with rocket launchers for arms asks, genuine confusion and curiosity lacing her tone. "Sounds like bad design to me."

Not for the first time does he wish they could see his sharp grin. "But the danger's twice the fun! And besides, life is only meaningful because it doesn't go on forever."

"You're insane," is all she says before helping the others hoist him up after putting on the heavy-duty cuffs. They're not quirk suppressants, he realizes. The cops are only aware of him having basic enhancements, so it's not much of a surprise that they're not taking all precautions when it comes to his 'simple' quirk.

A mistake that will serve to give Izuku the advantage just fifteen minutes later, when the boy is being strapped to a chair bolted into

the ground, a plain rectangular table in front of him.

He's in an interrogation room, but instead of being at Tsukauchi's police station, he was taken to a much more secure location. At least, that's what the surprisingly chill drivers told him on the way over here. He wasn't even able to look out the window of the police van he rode in with how tightly they had his head secured to the wall, so he relied on the two drivers upfront to tell him where he was being taken.

It honestly didn't matter where he would end up—he knows that most police stations around here have a paper copy of the more detailed reports on the USJ. Reports that haven't been fully transferred digitally yet. Reports that Izuku *needs.*

He still has his mask on, which is a little disappointing on behalf of the police. His ring is on his finger, too. In fact, the only things they took were a few of his weapons and lighters, which Izuku won't miss. He emptied the important stuff from his pockets hours before attempting this stunt, knowing they would search them, so he's fine. The only reason he left anything at all was so he wouldn't look too suspicious.

"Hey, did you know that atoms never touch each other? And since we're made of atoms, we've never touched anything in our entire lives?" He leans back as far as the restraints will allow in his chair. "So, to answer your question, sir, no. I did *not* punch that hero."

The poor detective handling Izuku's current interrogation looks three steps away from shooting himself in the foot. He looks like a rookie, as Izuku hasn't seen him before. To be fair, this is a different part of town. He doesn't hang around these parts too much if he can help it. Not much crime around here, anyway.

This place is, again, a much more secure police station than he's used to being held at. Why they didn't take him straight to jail or prison is beyond Izuku, but it's not like the boy is complaining. He is, however, a little offended. He may not be a huge priority criminal, but he'd like to at least think that they would've taken him to someplace more protected in any other circumstance. Is he not important at all in their eyes? Damn, maybe he should commit some more heinous crimes if it means they won't underestimate him like this again.

How could they act so scared around him on that street and yet be so careless with his handling? They're all stupid.

“A few officers found this on your person during the pat-down.” The detective says, ignoring Izuku’s previous comment as he places a small bag of what looks like weed on the table. They’ve been at this for a while now, and not once has Izuku actually answered his questions seriously. “Can you tell me what this is?”

And okay, that may or may not actually be his. Izuku has to wrack his brain to try and remember the past couple of days in detail. He does drug busts all the time, so the chance of him accidentally leaving some weed in one of his pockets is actually pretty high—pun 100% intended. He does know what it is, so the question should really be *how much would it have sold for? And can I get that back after we're done here?*

“Now *that* is Northern Lights, Cannabis Indica.”

If he’s going to make references to his favorite old TV show, he’s going to do it when it will invoke the best reactions. Being in the middle of an actual interrogation seems like a good time.

The detective’s eyes bulge at the precise response, and he shoots his own look at the Ziploc bag as if to check for himself if he’s right. “Wow, okay, I’m a little concerned. You sound twelve, how do you even—you know what? Never mind. Next question.” He fixes Izuku with an inquisitive glare. “So you’re admitting that it belongs to you?”

Izuku merely shrugs. “I don’t know. Probably.”

In all honesty, Rabbit is the type of vigilante to take your drugs and do them in front of you to make sure you can’t have them. He hasn’t done it yet, though, if only because of the fear he has of Eraserhead somehow finding out and killing him for it. God knows that that man knows everything when it comes to Izuku doing something slightly illegal. He doesn’t want to take that chance.

“How do you not know, kid?” The detective is squinting at him now. “It’s either a yes or no. Is it yours or not?”

“I can’t really remember.”

He gets an eye twitch in response, and Izuku shifts his gaze to the two-way mirror right behind the man. He knows people are watching this go down. He can feel multiple quirks just a few yards away, separated by a thin wall. It makes him feel like a specimen.

The detective breathes in deeply, seeming to force himself to calm

down. “That’s understandable, I guess. Marijuana *is* a memory loss drug. A lot of things can occur after usage that you might not remember.”

Izuku tilts his head, that desire for chaos once again burning under his skin. “Does that apply to everyone, regardless of who they are?”

“Yes, of course.” The man looks suddenly suspicious. “Why?”

“Well, I’m just saying that if that’s the case, you can’t be sure it’s not yours.”

Detective Rookie flinches, taken aback by the abrupt accusation. “That’s ridiculous. Of course it isn’t mine.”

Izuku shakes his head in mock disappointment. He nods at the baggy and straightens up, effortlessly taking control of the room with that simple action. “Marijuana is a memory loss drug, so maybe you just don’t remember that it’s yours.”

“I *would* remember,” the detective argues, trying to get back on track.

“How could you if it just erased your memory? You just told me it works on everyone; that includes yourself.”

“Kid, that’s not how it works. Stop trying to change the subject.”

Izuku narrows his eyes. “Now how would you know how it works?”

“Hey, knock it off!” Detective Rookie is flustered now, his face beet red while his hands curl into tight fists. “I’m interviewing *you—”*

“No! You said that *I’d* be conducting the interview when I walked in here, now exactly *how much pot did you smoke?”*

The detective jolts in his chair, staring sightlessly at the wall as he processes what just happened. He looks traumatized.

Good.

Izuku can just faintly hear the laughter coming from the other side of the mirror, and he allows himself a small giggle. After a few moments where the silence becomes a little too loud, Izuku leans forward as close as he can to whisper: “Hey, can I ask you a question?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “How does the lack of progress in this interrogation make you feel?”

The laughing grows louder behind the mirror, and then the man abruptly stands up from his chair and storms out of the room, practically throwing open the door before slamming it shut, the table rattling with the force.

And okay, *that* is what finally pushes Izuku over the edge. He dissolves into a fit of his own laughter, vibrating even with the restraints around his body. It's when he calms down a little bit that he's aware of another buzzing poking at the back of his skull, a very familiar type of buzzing.

Izuku stops laughing immediately once the door is pushed open, though the smug expression doesn't leave. "Ooh, nice to see ya again, Tsuki."

Detective Tsukauchi sighs, sinking into the chair the other detective was in just prior. He's carrying a large binder and a cup of coffee in his hands, even though it's almost evening. He's wearing his signature outfit, but Izuku can't help but feel that something's off. "Wish I could say the same, Rabbit."

"Wait, what are you doing here?" It's a genuine question. Izuku honestly didn't expect him to come, especially since he knows it's one of his busiest days of the week. "Did they think your quirk was actually gonna be useful or something?"

Tsukauchi glares at him, and to anyone else, it may seem like a warning, like a threat, but Izuku can see the level of alarm and concern clear as day in those eyes. The man is worried. It's as if he's silently asking Izuku what the *hell* he's doing, and also what the hell is wrong with him. Maybe that's why he came here so quickly; he wants to make sure Rabbit won't get into too much trouble.

Izuku swings his legs like a child—his feet barely fucking touch the floor, for god's sake—and throws his head back. The detective is taking too long to sort out his emotions and answer, so he'll continue without one. "Took you less than an hour to get here. I'm glad I'm important enough for you to drop your work and come talk to me."

"Talk?" Tsukauchi's entire demeanor changes once he realizes Izuku isn't willing to give him a clue as to what's going on. His gaze hardens significantly. "This is an interrogation, Rabbit, not a simple conversation."

"Spare me the boring lecture, Tsuki. You spew it every time we meet and every time I think I'm about to roll my eyes into a different

dimension."

The detective isn't fazed. Wow. It's starting to look like he's actually upset. "Do you have any idea what your file looks like right now, son? You've been charged with a few dozen accounts of murder, assault, *armed* assault, larceny, attempted murder—"

"I pushed him off a building into a lake," the vigilante defends. "So technically that last one was gravity's work, not me."

He continues as if the interruption never happened. "—breaking and entering, disturbing the peace, conspiracy to commit murder, public quirk usage, vigilantism, public intoxication—"

"I wasn't even that drunk!"

"—arson, possession of illegal firearms—"

"Those were stolen."

"—hit and run—"

"He was *jaywalking!"*

"—not to mention the fact that the car you hit the suspect with wasn't even yours. Need I go on about the trouble you're in?"

Izuku thinks for a second, tipping his head to the side to exaggerate his actions. He's always been one for theatrics. "Don't forget to spell out the grand theft and slander. I'm rather proud of those."

Tsukauchi massages his temple. "Son, these are serious charges. You could be facing life in prison, even at your young age."

"Terrifying," he deadpans, throwing another look at the two-way mirror, this time staring directly at where he knows one of the higher-ups is sitting. "On an unrelated note, do you guys have any snacks? Maybe some unsalted peanuts? All this talk about my accomplishments is making me famished."

Tsukauchi swipes a hand down his face and peers at him with furrowed brows. He looks distressed. *Oh. I'm actually freaking him out right now because he thinks I actually got caught and don't have a plan. Whoops. That's my bad.*

He feels only a teeny tiny bit bad.

“You should not be here,” Tsukauchi settles on, folding his arms across the table.

“I shouldn’t,” Izuku agrees, continuing with his cheerful act. “On second thought, I still don’t know why I’m here. Can you run down that list again? Maybe a couple more times to make sure everyone hears it?”

The detective doesn’t take the bait. “You’re a vigilante. That’s enough reason as it is. You also threw a rock into a police officer’s windshield today, so that right there is another case of property damage and attempt at bodily harm.”

“Okay, that last part is bullshit!” Izuku starts on another rant, stalling for more time. His distraction should be put into effect any moment now. “He told me he likes to play catch, alright? I asked him if he could catch this cool ass rock I found on the side of the road, and he said yes, so I threw it at him! What’s the big problem here?”

Tsukauchi looks like he wants to cry. “Rabbit, please. This isn’t a joke for once.”

Oh, but it is.

Before Izuku can say that, though, the intercom comes on, the speaker at the corner of the room piercing Izuku’s eardrums.

“Detective, the Chief wants to speak with you. Says it’s urgent.”

Right on time. Izuku’s distraction thankfully worked. *Thank you, AINA, for that perfectly timed false alarm. I’m sorry I had to leave you at home, but at least now I know you can work from long distances.*

Detective Tsukauchi closes his eyes and seems to rethink his life decisions for a moment, and when he reopens them, he looks suddenly much older than he did a second ago. And alright, maybe that guilt is increasing now.

“Let me see what I can do,” Tsukauchi whispers, low enough so the cameras and the people behind the mirror won’t hear. “You better have a good plan, son. Officials from the Commission will be here in ten minutes to take you.”

The meaning is clear. *Get out of here while you can before they ruin you.*

Izuku is hit with a sudden wave of gratitude. He doesn’t know *why*

Tsukauchi cares this much. He doesn't know *why* he's even bothering with telling him this, but he's grateful.

He wasn't planning on sticking around for much longer anyway, but it's still nice to be told what to expect on the off chance that his plan doesn't work.

Izuku waves goodbye to the detective—a silent acknowledgment of his statement—before returning to his carefree attitude. "Don't worry about me! You do whatever you need to do. I'll just be here, chained to the table, waiting for you to get back. Without a lawyer, might I add. Which is probably *illegal."*

And then he's left alone in the interrogation room, which is exactly the situation that he hoped for. Phase II of the plan should occur exactly one minute after the first fake alarm, so he's got twenty seconds left to prepare. He flexes his hands, testing the strength of the large cuffs on his wrists. They're pretty resistant—the metal is a good few inches thick. In all honesty, he probably won't be able to break out of them with just *Boost* helping him out.

It's a good thing I have One for All, then, huh? I wonder what All Might would say about this.

There are ten seconds left on the clock when Izuku realizes that Tsukauchi left his binder open on the table, and when he leans forward slightly to see what the pages contain, he nearly chokes.

It's the schematics and details of this very building, given by the hastily-written title on top of the first page. But more importantly, it's a diagram of the ventilation systems. No, of his *method of transportation.*

He spotted the vent hatch above him the moment he was marched in here, but he didn't even consider it as a way out because he wasn't sure where it led to. He might've gotten lost. Now, however, he knows where to go and which turns to take to get to the station's file room.

Izuku was planning on busting down the door and taking everyone by surprise, but it seems his plans have changed for the better. This seems much more logical, much safer.

Five seconds. Izuku has to time it right if he doesn't want the people on the other side of the mirror to spot the red sparks coming off of him, courtesy of One for All. If he breaks free from the cuffs at the exact moment the station shuts down, the power going out should

distract them.

He told AINA to shut down the power systems to all nearby police stations since he wouldn't know which one they would take him to. It was just to be safe, and he's never been more glad of his past-self's thinking than he is right now. This plan was precarious at best, but at least he made some foundations for it. Maybe this *isn't* the best idea. Maybe he should've just waited the extra few days for the files to be copied digitally instead of throwing himself into the grasp of the police to get a chance to steal the documents.

All of these thoughts go out the window, however, once the lights shut off and the door to the interrogation room locks automatically as an emergency default.

Hah. They played themselves.

The cops start to bang on the door and try to get it open, and Izuku just smirks. He can't see very well in the dark, but he can make due. Red lightning dances across his arms as he snaps the cuffs in two, and he can only hope the security camera in the corner was taken out as well.

Izuku jumps onto the desk after tearing off his ankle restraints, making quick work of the steel-plated vent hatch. Once he's inside he can't help but snort.

People should really learn to lock their ceiling. They don't know what kind of animal can get in if they don't.

The vent space is small, but he's worked with worse. According to the papers conveniently shown in Tsukauchi's binder, he has to take two lefts and one right to get to the file room. As he crawls, he can hear shouted voices directly below him. Thundering footsteps shake the vents, and Izuku cackles quietly to himself.

"What do you mean he's gone?"

"Well, technically we don't know if he is! We still need the door open!"

"Just pop off the two-way mirror you imbeciles! You three, search the rest of the rooms! He's got to be in the building somewhere."

Oh, Izuku is *in* the building alright.

He drops down in his designated spot once he's sure the voices have

faded a little ways away, and he quickly makes his way towards the most recently filled filing cabinets. The light from somebody's computer allows him to see just a little bit. *Gotta search for the right date, gotta search for the right date, gotta search for the right—*

"Aha!" Izuku pulls out a thick manila folder and slips it in his jacket. He has no time to waste looking through it right now. The boy slides the drawers closed and doesn't bother heading back through the vents. There's unfortunately no window in this room, meaning he has to find another escape. It's still incredibly dark out in the hallways—the only light being from the red emergency ones. If he can run fast enough through the main building, the chances of getting caught or recognized are low. That's his best option.

He opens the door of the files room and peeks out, searching with *Extract* for any nearby people. They're all one hallway down, which isn't nearly enough space between him and them, but it's all he's allowed at the moment.

Izuku powers up *Boost* in his legs and runs. He doesn't know exactly where the entrance is, so this is gonna be interesting. He rounds the corner and feels someone coming up on him. Without a second thought, he rams into them, shoving them into the wall as he zooms past them down the adjoining hall.

"Sorry!" He calls over his shoulder. "It's not personal!"

Okay, maybe it is a little personal. This is payback for all those times he was called Bunny instead of Rabbit.

He shoves past two more unknowing officers and speeds for the large opening coming up. This must be it. This is the lounge area of the station, the entrance should be right over—

Tsukauchi and Sansa are standing right by the door. Izuku nearly trips over his own two feet but doesn't slow down. Can't afford to. There's a bunch of cops chasing after him now, and they may not have speed as he does, but they do have a lot more in numbers. He has to put as much distance between them as possible.

For the briefest of seconds, Izuku meets their eyes in turn. Sansa looks amused by the entire situation, if not a little annoyed, but Tsukauchi looks more relieved. And is that—is that fondness?

Wow, now that Izuku is thinking about it, he must look pretty crazy right about now: running full speed towards the doors leading to the

outside with random officers coming after him from behind, the hallways dark in the background except for the red emergency lights.

He probably looks like a fool.

Tsukauchi and Sansa move to the side at the last second, feigning loss of balance. Izuku bursts through the doors and immediately heads for the nearest building, ignoring the surprised screams of the civilians on the sidewalk as he does so. It's evening now, and the sun is dipping low into the sky. Kacchan is probably blowing up his phone back at the apartment.

Hah! No Eraserhead to catch me stealing government documents this time!

By the time those cops burst out of the building as well, Izuku is long gone.

The boy can barely believe it, though. That actually *worked?* Izuku feels giddy once the weight of the situation crashes down on him, and he allows himself to sprawl out on the roof of a dentist's office a few miles away to collect himself. He pulls out the manila folder from his jacket and looks through the contents. Yep, this is indeed all of the files on the criminals from the USJ attack.

He already knows their names and quirks, what he doesn't know is who they're affiliated with. See, most criminals at the Club don't work alone. They can't, not with the number of heroes and police these days. Even Izuku accepts help from others from time to time, and he's about as independent as you can get.

Izuku's smile sharpens to reveal pointed teeth when he pops off his mask to get some air. As he flips through the hundred or so pages, he realizes that his instincts were correct. These are people he's seen before at the Club, and he knows *exactly* who these criminals are friends with.

The documents provide him with a gang history and acquaintance list for each criminal, so Izuku is able to make multiple connections as to who they're friends with. He can guess how close they are to each other, too.

And close friends tell each other stuff, right? They offer you jobs and team missions. They tell you everything about their upcoming bust, even if you will have no part in it.

What this means is that there were people with the knowledge that

the USJ would be getting attacked. People who didn't come forward about it, who didn't tell *Izuku* about it. You see, Izuku has made it clear since the very beginning that if anything were to come up regarding UA or any other school in general, he would be made aware of it or else.

The entire fucking *Club* knows that. It's an unspoken rule. So for someone to keep it quiet? To let their friends participate in such an immoral battle while they themselves stand back to watch from the safety of their own home? It makes Izuku angry. So, *so* angry.

No, *furious.*

The rage takes a hold of his thoughts and turns them black, filtering out the niceties and the hesitance until all that's left is darkness. The fury leaves him feeling cruel.

There's an image in his mind. A face, to be more exact. The face of someone who he's well acquainted with at the Club. He knows that this man is best friends with four of the criminals listed in these files—he *must* have been offered to join the cause by at least one of them. He declined, obviously, or else he would be sitting in jail alongside them, but that doesn't make it any better.

The point is that he knew and didn't speak about it. He failed to tell anyone that a high school would be getting attacked by the most dangerous villain group around.

Izuku glances at the moon that's starting to slowly rise in the sky and guesstimates what time it is. His phone is still back at the house.

The man goes to the Club at around eleven every Friday night. I remember him being there every time without fail. I can catch him now since I'm already in the right mindset.

He doesn't think he'd be able to go to sleep anyway if he had to wait to dole out this justice.

Is this right? Probably not. But does he care? Not with this rage fueling his insides. He's probably going to have a lot of regrets tomorrow, though.

There are three more hours until the opening. Izuku is going to stop by his place for a moment to feed Missy and gear back up, and then he's going to patrol to keep himself occupied.

He only hopes that the eyes that have been watching him ever since he left the police station belong to someone friendly.

Izuku very rarely wears his full costume to the Underground Club. He doesn't need to. They're like a family there.

At least, that's what he thought before the USJ attack.

It's safe to say that he wears it this time around, though. Everyone goes quiet when he opens the door with a bit more force than necessary, and he practically glides through the open space. They always do that when he walks in, but this time is different. It's like they can feel the tension in the air. They can sense the change in his energy, too.

He's no longer carefree or happy-go-lucky. He's *pissed.*

Their gazes stay on him the entire walk to the front of the bar, but he doesn't care. It's not like it matters. Let them watch. It'll be a nice example for them all. A sweet reminder, in fact.

Izuku spots familiar gray hair and doesn't waste any time in grabbing the person by the back of the shirt. He yanks them to their feet and ignores the choked yelp he gets in return. There are muffled gasps coming from everyone else, but instead of replying he lets his eyes fall onto the man's exposed wrist. His sleeve has ridden up, revealing a dark tattoo.

The same tattoo that his little buddies have. It's a shame said buddies are currently sitting in jail for attempted murder, however.

It's the right guy. He always makes sure of that before continuing.

"The hell are you doin', Rabbit!"

Izuku hooks the man's ankle to get him to lose his balance, which makes it all the easier to curl a hand around the criminal's throat and lift him up off the ground.

“You knew about the League’s attack.” Izuku starts, shoving him up into the nearby wall. It’s not phrased like a question.

“What are you—!”

He grips him harder, not enough to cut off the air supply, but enough to get him to feel the pressure. “The attack on the USJ. You knew about it beforehand.”

“Yeah?” The man scrabbles for purchase on the ground as he chokes, but the tips of his toes barely touch the wood flooring. “So what?”

So what? Is he joking?

Piece of Shit Criminal has just added more fuel to the fire inside Izuku. The boy is practically shaking with the effort to not release the energy inside him.

“It seems we’ve hit a misunderstanding. You know how this club works.” The dumbass criminal aims a kick at him to dislodge his hold, but Izuku easily blocks it with his free palm, hiking up a knee to hit home in the dude’s crotch. “We don’t harm kids here, you dumbfuck.”

“Ah! Which is pretty fucking ironic since there’s no way you can be an adult yourself. Why they even let you in here in the first place is a damn mystery.”

Izuku lets out a controlled breath. This is familiar to him. Painfully familiar. The man’s got a point, but it doesn’t mean he’s not an ass. He’s just an ass who’s right, that’s all. “Why didn’t you take the job? I know they offered it to you.”

The man grunts, smacking at Izuku’s arm once more to make him loosen his grip. “Because it didn’t pay enough. I knew it would go to shit. It’s UA after all, they’ve got pretty tight security. See where all the other scum went?”

Of course it’s about the money. Izuku isn’t surprised. But hearing him talk about the attack as if it was just another cash-out opportunity for him makes something in Izuku’s blood boil.

His classmates could have died. His teachers, his *mentor* could have died. Almost did die, in fact.

Izuku tilts his head, and it’s almost predatory-like. “As of this moment I consider you a part of that scum, so watch it. Honestly, I don’t care

that you chose not to take the job. The issue here is you didn't tell any of the Club's officials about it. You didn't tell me." He leans closer, aware of how everyone else in the bar seems to hold their breath. "Everyone knows how I feel about UA."

This closeness seems to make the criminal uncomfortable. "I don't know what the fuck you want me to tell you. You've got a fetish for choking people or something? Let me down!"

Izuku tightens his grip once more, effectively shutting him up. That's *his* line to say. Only Izuku can make dirty jokes like that to make people flush.

As he glares at the man's face and tries to pick out some hidden emotions to use against him, Izuku's mind wanders. It would be so easy. One for All is humming inside him, but not in a good way. It feels wrong. He's the one with the upper hand right now. He's the one with the control.

It scares Izuku how much he likes it.

"Rabbit. Remember your oath."

The calm voice comes from the woman on the other side of the counter. She's the one who gives Izuku his paychecks. She's always been really nice to him. But despite his respect for her, he could still give a shit about the oath right now. The rules about not fighting in the building and not harming one of their own only apply to other members. This man gave up his right to be called a member of the Underground Club the moment he decided to let that info on the USJ slip by.

"I think it's this guy who should be remembering the oath," he murmurs, but he forces himself to calm down anyways.

The room is deathly quiet, like the moment before the next intake of breath. They're all waiting on his next move. He knows that not one of them would be able to stop him from harming this monster in his grasp, not that any of them would even try.

The man is turning purple now, and there's a panic so fresh in his gaze that Izuku feels himself start to tense up again at the familiarity of it.

He knows the man is scared shitless, but of what? Of what he'll do to him? Does he think he'll torture him or something?

The fear of suffering is worse than suffering itself. It twists in the gut like a hot knife, shrill as a cicada, fastidious as it is incessantly, obsessively overbearing. And Izuku understands. *God* he understands.

A little more power and that would be it. It would be so effortless. It's kind of ironic how fast a human life can be taken away, especially at the hands of another. It's when the man's struggling starts to slow down that Izuku blinks out of his cold rage, because suddenly there's an image at the back of his mind. All Might is there, staring at him with that disappointed frown of his, and so are Present Mic and Kacchan. Neither of them looks particularly happy. The one that hurts the most is Eraserhead, who's watching him in silence with clear disapproval.

They wouldn't want him to do this. This is—this is wrong, he remembers.

Izuku drops Criminal Bitch to the floor with a sigh, the burn that always accompanies him after using his enhancements feeling dull under his skin. It almost feels like shame.

"Count yourself lucky," Izuku forces out, shoving his hands into his pockets to hide how they tremble. "The next time you fail to report something like that, seeing as that's a responsibility of ours here at the Club, I won't be so lenient." He turns his glare onto everyone else in the crowd. There's not a phone or camera in sight, as expected. "Anyone else have anything they'd like to confess while I'm here?"

Crickets. Everyone is on edge, and for good reason, too. Rabbit never initiates fights, nor does he ever snap like this in front of people. This is a rare treat for them. It's just as scary as it is exhilarating.

Izuku turns and stalks toward the door, moving to pull his hood back over his face.

"Rabbit." The guy is struggling to right himself from his crumpled-up position on the ground. No one seems to be helping him; professionals do, in fact, have standards. He's rubbing at the marks on his throat that'll surely turn into bruises soon. He waits until he has Izuku's full attention before continuing, voice slow, as if truly damning him. "Go to *hell."*

Izuku pauses. Works his jaw.

"I'll meet you there."

Chapter End Notes

i know you're obsessed with finding love, but please do not try to find love in the boy who has flowers fall from his mouth when he speaks to you. notice how they are dead flowers.

(and notice how the blood that falls from his lips is not just his own)

s

not yet

Chapter Notes

> [warnings for this chap: underage drinking, mentions of child abuse, unhealthy thoughts (stay safe, ily!)]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When you're homeless, things change.

You no longer feel safe; you no longer have a warm bed waiting for you after a particularly hard day; you no longer know where your next meal will come from—the list can go on. That's just how it is, though, fighting to survive.

Surviving isn't the same thing as living. That distinction is important to make.

But in all honesty, leaving his father's side wasn't a huge change for Izuku. He never felt at home back there, he never felt secure. So when the time came, *homeless* was a term he already felt acquainted with.

When he was still living with this father, he wasn't safe. The bed in his room was never warm or comforting; it was a prison. He felt trapped there, contained. Food always served as a reward for his good behavior, not as a right. If he made progress with his training or did something that would please All for One, the quality and quantity of the food he was given would increase. This privilege would be taken away at any moment, however. Father's moods constantly changed back then, and the man never thought twice about taking his displeasure out on the son he knew wouldn't fight back.

After his escape, the fear remained inside his gut, as did the dread. He's never managed to shake those feelings off, even now, no matter how irrational they are or how utterly *pathetic* they make him feel.

For Izuku, the only major change being homeless brought upon him was that he had to learn how to enjoy time alone. He also had to learn how to live alone. While he was always treated like dirt by the majority of his makeshift family, his father was still there, always looming over his shoulder. The dark shadow that lurked around every corner and dared him to disobey. Izuku was never left alone for long, if only because All for One knew Izuku would do something he shouldn't the second he was given the chance. Kurogiri was always the

saving grace in those times; the only one that cared and tended to Izuku's wounds when the boy could barely even stand after training. See, Izuku knew how to survive then, but he didn't know how to live.

Enjoying time alone, learning how to *live* alone—those are things Izuku has never been good at, things that he's never been privy to due to his father's strictness, but he's been managing so far.

He's been okay. His accomplishments speak for themselves. He's not technically homeless now, either. Hasn't been for three years, just about. The first few months after his escape was the hardest. Despite living in Japan for all his life, a place that should've been familiar to him after all that time, he remembers feeling incredibly lost and scared while standing in the middle of a crowded street after finally burning that hellhole to the ground, the city lights blinding him as he spun around in the middle of that intersection. It was his first taste of freedom after so, so long. The feeling was nothing short of euphoric. And even now, having been out of his father's clutches for a while, he can hardly believe he made it.

He didn't really expect his plan to work, so at that moment he didn't know what to do. That was the issue then: taking the next step. Trying to find some semblance of normal after his entire life was upended.

But back to the point. He *has* a home now, it's just not official or legal. Just because he doesn't have hot water or electricity without his generator doesn't mean anything. Again, he's been managing.

Exhaustion isn't new to him either. He can never afford to let his guard down, not as Rabbit or as Midoriya Izuku. It'd be stupid and completely illogical; he was taught better than that.

Hm. I haven't visited Ms. Hanako in a while. I should do that tomorrow.

Kacchan has been angrily blowing up his phone throughout the day, and Izuku is a little ashamed to admit that he's been ignoring the notifications. He's been on a rampage for the past twenty-four hours, hunting down the rest of the fools that knew about the USJ attack and failed to say anything. He's gotten to eight so far; which means that this one is lucky number nine. And speaking of—

"Fifteen seconds before street arrival."

AINA's voice crackles in his ear, Izuku immediately straightening up. He's standing on a walkway between two buildings, overlooking the street three stories beneath his feet. His target is currently in a car

chase with a ton of police on his tail, not that that's going to stop Izuku from getting his point across. Petty Bitch is ahead of the cop cars by a couple miles, so Izuku has plenty of time to do what he needs to do before they catch up.

He hears it before he sees it: the screech of tires against asphalt as a car (most likely stolen) veers onto the street, smoke coming out of the side. It must've been damaged by one of the cops a few minutes prior. Izuku watches the scene with mild disinterest, the wind whipping at the bunny ears on his hood as he stands on the overhang. The city is dark at this time, with no lights beside the faint streetlamps around them. Izuku stands, eerily still and silent, as the car speeds closer. It looks to be going over sixty miles an hour, and the criminal is about five hundred feet away. AINA tells him how long it'll take for the car to be right below him, and he hums in affirmation, slightly disgruntled. His own calculation was off by half a second.

Over two hundred feet. Just a little longer.

One for All thrums under his skin, the slightest hint of red lightning zipping around his body and illuminating his figure in the otherwise dark street. His eyes glow scarlet, piercing into Petty Bitch's soul from even this far away. He must have noticed him by now, but the car doesn't slow down. To the criminal, it's either Rabbit or the police: the answer should be easy, really. And yet, despite Izuku's worsening reputation, the man chooses *wrong*.

Izuku takes in an exasperated breath, feeling the rush of air around him, and steps off the ledge.

It's kind of funny how Petty Bitch screams like a little girl once Izuku lands on the hood, steel-toed boots leaving large dents in the reinforced metal. The impact stings and runs up the boy's bones, but he's too far gone to care about a little pain. He rears back an arm and plunges his fist directly into the windshield (this is the second time he’s ruined one in the past twenty hours, his mind gleefully supplies), and grabs onto the steering wheel. Petty Bitch screeches, pulling his hands back just in time as Izuku yanks the wheel from its socket and carelessly throws it off somewhere to the side.

Steering should only be for people who deserve it, Izuku thinks mockingly, right before the criminal slams on the brakes and sends the vigilante flying back. He rolls when he hits the ground, jabbing the sharp end of his bōstaff into the asphalt to slow his momentum, the friction causing orange and yellow sparks to bite at his hand.

When he looks back up, the car door is being flung open, Loser Bitch stumbling out of it with all the grace and desperation of a dying man.

“Ooh,” Izuku calls out, “we've got a runner!”

He pulls out his grappling hook and aims it at the yellow-haired man. The wire wraps around him quickly, causing him to stumble and face-plant into the ground now that his arms are stuck to his sides. Izuku reels him in like a very large fish, smirking to himself all the while with one hand in his pockets. He’s casual about it, quiet. He doesn’t make a sound. Doesn't need to.

He knows silence is scarier.

“Wait, wait! You gotta let me go, dude, I didn’t—”

Izuku kicks him in the jaw, a resounding crack sounding throughout the air. It shuts the man up instantly, making Izuku scoff. The wire retracts from Loser Bitch's body and recedes back into the gun, which goes straight into Izuku's jacket. “I don't have much time, so you should probably listen carefully. I'm not gonna repeat myself.” Izuku grips his hair and pins him to the ground, making sure he won't run. “I know who you are, and I know what you did. You're pretty smart, so I'm sure you know why I'm here. Rumors spread fast.”

“I—I didn't do anything! I wasn't even at that damn school, you gotta believe me!”

“I do believe you. But that's the problem, isn't it? You didn't *do* anything.” His grip tightens in the man’s hair, and Izuku presses his face further into the concrete. The pained grunt that follows only adds fuel to Izuku’s barely contained anger. The boy yanks him up and sends him crashing into the side of the car, Petty Bitch sliding down it with a choked cry. Blood is leaking like a faucet from his nose, and Izuku tips his head to the side, still holding onto the yellow hair. “Twenty-three. That's how many were injured. Twenty of them were students, mind you.”

The guy wipes at his face frantically. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Alright, I guess I overestimated your intelligence. You might need some more incentive.” Izuku lets go of the man’s head and, in a swift motion, grabs his elbow and snaps it backward. The criminal's scream pierces the air, sharp and sudden, as his arm is inverted.

Izuku forces himself not to flinch at the sight of the mangled limb, and with a start he realizes the noise will attract attention. On top of that, there must be less than a minute before the cops round the corner. *I'm running out of time.*

The man's scream turns into a sob, and Izuku lets the arm fall to the ground uselessly. "It'll be fine," he says coolly. "They'll fix that up before taking you to jail. But I'm still not hearing an answer, so perhaps that wasn't enough."

To his credit, Petty Criminal quiets down instantly, his head snapping up to stare at the vigilante with wide eyes. If he didn't before, he *definitely* knows who he is now. "You, you are—"

Izuku hums. "Beautiful, a genius, immensely talented—"

"Dangerous," the man interrupts, and Izuku pouts.

"Do you want me to do your right arm next?" It's a tease, more of a bluff—Izuku isn't that cruel, not even remotely—but it gets the desired response.

The loser jolts. "No! I get it, I should've said something, okay? I was just scared! You have to understand. I couldn't snitch. I wanted to, but they'd *kill* me!"

Izuku narrows his eyes, frustration settling like fire in his stomach. At least it's a reason other than *I just didn't want to get caught by the pro heroes.* Doesn't make it right, but it's something. Fear can do a lot to people.

"The first police car has arrived," AINA warns. Just as she says that, Izuku can hear the distant sound of sirens. Damn. He has to wrap this up. He's already taking too long.

"Scared, huh?" Izuku crouches down, making sure he's eye level with the criminal. The street lamp behind him outlines his figure and leaves everything else shadowed. Only his eyes have light; the dark red a stark contrast to the darkness. "Imagine how those students felt."

The man opens his mouth to speak, but Izuku's fist meets his face and knocks him out cold. His head hangs limply to the side, and Izuku rubs at his knuckles. *Well, that was eventful.*

"AINA, you know the drill. Send a text to Tsukauchi detailing this loser's crimes. You can shut down for the night after that."

"Of course. Enjoy yourself, Izuku."

The screen on his forearm goes black, and Izuku makes a mental note to charge her when he gets back to the apartment.

As he turns and runs farther into the city, leaving the unconscious man far behind for the cops to find, Izuku is suddenly reminded of familiar words, words that have been drilled into his mind since the very beginning of his vigilantism.

Cowardice is a sin, so choke on it.

It's four hours into his patrol that he sees him. His tall silhouette is intimidating, even when he's simply standing on the roof of a building. It's the one where they usually meet on Friday nights, but to say Izuku is surprised to see him is an understatement. He still has his bandages on, so why is he even out here? It's not even a Friday! It's Saturday night!

Well, Sunday morning, now.

Izuku pushes away his hesitance and resigns to his fate. It's clear the man has been waiting for him to show up.

The moment Izuku's foot hits the edge of the roof, he's wrapped so tightly in Eraserhead's capture weapon that he can hardly breathe, much less move. With a hiss, he's yanked forward to come face-to-face with the underground hero. Izuku can tell he's furious even with the bandages covering his face and arms. Which also begs the question—how the fuck is he even using his scarf? He's not even touching it! It's like he's moving it with his fucking *mind.*

Eraserhead's quirk is activated, so Izuku can't rely on *Boost* to get him out of this one. Not that it matters much; he's way too tired to do much of anything but hang there.

"You have some explaining to do, kid." Eraserhead starts, his voice tight with anger. "With the shit you pulled Friday night, I have half a

mind to drag you back to the station and throw you in jail myself."

Shit. Tsukauchi probably told him about his latest stunt. Either that or he saw it on the news. Izuku wouldn't be surprised either way. "If you're this uspet over it, why didn't you just text me or something? You could've just—" Izuku cuts himself off with a dramatic gasp and looks pointedly at the hero's bandaged arms. "Oh my god! I'm so sorry! That was so insensitive of me."

The malice radiating off of Eraserhead's body is almost suffocating as he comes closer, hair pulling free from his bun and lifting towards the sky. "This isn't a joke, Rabbit. I've had enough of your games. Whatever this is you're doing, it's going to stop. Right now."

Funny, that's exactly what Tsukauchi said.

Izuku doesn't voice that thought aloud, though. "Can you let me go?" He asks instead. It's difficult to think with all of the pressure on his limbs.

"No," the hero replies, tightening the fabric around him—a punishment for even asking. "Not until you explain to me what the *hell* you were thinking, letting yourself get caught like that. Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? How reckless?"

The boy rolls his eyes, glancing away. "I had everything under control. I was fine."

"Really? So you did all that for what? Fun?"

He knows about the files, he's just testing me. He is a teacher, after all. Habits never really die.

Izuku won't play into his trap though. "It gets kind of boring doing the same ol' stuff, y'know? I have to keep everyone on their toes."

"You," Eraserhead starts before stopping abruptly, patience wearing thin. He shakes his head. "Out of all the shit you've done this past year, kid, this has pissed me off the most."

"Oi! That's a bad word. You should be setting an example for the kids —*ow, fuck!"* Izuku glares at the man as the scarf tightens around him yet again, almost nearing the point of pain. "That's excessive force, you dick! Let me go! I'm sure some part of this is illegal!"

"Rabbit."

Izuku suddenly feels like he got full-named by a parent. There's an uncomfortable itching under his limbs now, and it doesn't help that he can't even move his hands enough to quell the irritation. He doesn't know why he's being difficult. Perhaps it's because this is the first time he's seeing Eraserhead as Rabbit since the attack, and the freshly-changed bandages on his teacher's face are bringing back his guilt tenfold. But the guilt brings with it anger, and Izuku finds himself kicking out with his legs, the only part of his body not restrained. “I’m giving you one more chance to let me go before I cut a huge chunk of this scarf off.” Izuku threatens. “I’ve done it before and *will* do it again.”

Eraserhead narrows his eyes and examines him, noticing the vigilante’s stiff posture and clenched fists. His gaze lingers on the boy's hood, which has dark droplets of blood smeared on one of the bunny ears. “What's going on with you?”

“I’d tell you if you’d just *let me go—”* Izuku falls to the ground with a yelp as the capture weapon loosens suddenly. “Okay, fine. It's like I told you, I was just having some fun. You should've seen their faces when they saw me escaping. It was very funny. 10/10, would do it again.”

The semi-honest answer doesn't seem to satisfy the man. “Funny? You think stealing government files is *funny?”*

“In a cosmic sort of way, yes.” Izuku shrugs. “And besides, it’s not like they lost anything. I'm gonna give them back eventually.”

“You better.” The hero sighs and lets his Erasure wear off, his hair falling onto his shoulders in waves. He looks suddenly that much more tired. “You should know how angry the Commission is now. They're having a meeting on Tuesday to decide whether or not to send more heroes after you.”

“Oh? That's not new. Heroes chase after me all the time.”

“Heroes like Endeavor, kid. He might just go after you even without direct permission, and you know what will happen once he does.”

I'll die a fiery, gruesome death, probably.

His voice was grim, and Izuku squares his shoulders, gazing at the gravel by his feet. “Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence. And please, I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal out of this. You know, some vigilantes are burning down entire cities and working

with villains in their free time. I'm practically an angel compared to them. Cut me some slack."

Near-silent footsteps. Izuku forces himself not to flinch away as Eraserhead moves closer to him. The air is thick with an emotion that Izuku can't identify yet.

"I want to talk about those files you took," the hero says finally, carefully, completely ignoring his previous comment. "Some of the villains listed on there have relations to quite a few of the criminals you caught for Tsukauchi earlier today."

He knows what I'm doing. It's only been a day and he's put the pieces together.

Izuku looks up, expecting his teacher to look judgmental, but the man only looks perturbed.

It sets Izuku's nerves on fire.

"Don't lecture me," he growls, spinning on his heel to face the city below. "You'd be doing the same thing if you weren't injured. You have to be feeling the same way after what happened to you and your class."

"My class?" Aizawa steps around him to catch his gaze, and Izuku hates how the hero's voice changes slightly on the word *my,* as if the man had expected a different word to be used there. "What happened on Wednesday isn't your fault, kid, and going after the ones who are only partially responsible for it isn't going to change anything. I *know* you know that."

Izuku shrugs off the man's words. "It'll prevent something like that from happening again. And they're criminals as it is, so why I'm bringing them in is irrelevant. They'd be put in jail eventually even without my involvement."

"I wasn't talking about them."

It's the gentle way he says it that makes Izuku angry. Like he's trying to calm a rabid animal. It's easy to see what he's trying to say: *it's not going to change how you feel. It's just going to make things worse.*

Christ, he can't just have one day to do his job, can he? Rabbit was born to do exactly this—rid the streets of monsters. To make sure that criminals know that there are boundaries that they just can't cross

without consequences. If Izuku stops now, it'll tell everyone that what those fools did is right. That they got off scot-free. Yeah. That's not going to happen. Izuku sucks in an even breath. “I'm just cleaning up the city.”

“Rabbit—”

“You almost died.” At the man’s questioning gaze, the boy continues with a fire burning inside him. “You won't be getting out of those casts for at least another week. Thirteen nearly died, as did one of your students in the flood zone. If I'm not mistaken, All Might was injured pretty heavily, too. Do you really want those criminals to be left unpunished?”

Eraserhead just continues to stare down at him, his expression one of faint disappointment.

Izuku clenches his shaking hands into fists, burning holes into the ground before him with his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m not here to lecture you.”

“Then why *are* you here? To tell me how screwed up everything is? To finally put an end to all this and take me in? Which is it?”

The boots in Izuku’s vision move a few steps closer, and his teacher's looming figure, his mere presence, is like a hot iron down his back. “I’m here because I care, Rabbit.” His voice is a little softer now, still just as gruff, but just a tiny bit lighter. It reminds Izuku of dark rooms filled with static. This would be a lot easier if Izuku knew whether or not the hero actually meant what he’s saying. “And I want to warn you that you’ll only end up hurting yourself in your search for justice. Getting yourself caught in order to get some pointless files is one thing, but this? This is dangerous.”

Izuku forces back the heat rising in his throat. Now is not the time to cough up blood. He needs to get back soon to take another one of his pills. “You don’t think I know that?”

Eraserhead shakes his head. “No, I don’t think you do, kid. I think you’re blinded by whatever’s fueling you to do what you think is right. I think you’re going to end up losing yourself.”

Losing himself? Izuku stays silent this time, because he’s right. He’s always fucking right.

The hero continues after a few more moments, as if to let the previous words sink in. “You’re going to hurt yourself, Rabbit. And I think you know that, too.”

That’s nothing new.

Izuku scoffs a little and turns away even more. “Thank you for letting me know what I do, and how I do it. Wasn’t aware.”

His teacher sighs. “Kid—”

“No,” Izuku interrupts, voice low, loaded like a gun with a single bullet left in the chamber. “We’re not doing this. We’re not friends.”

The older hero takes a sharp breath in, and in the silence Izuku can hear the sounds of the city below them. He uses the familiarity to calm the fire burning underneath his skin.

“I’m sorry, Eraser,” Izuku says, voice tripping over the nickname, so worn and fond and useless. “It’s not a good time for either one of us. I’ll see you later.”

He doesn’t wait for the man to reply as he walks to the edge of the roof, planning to simply disappear from his watchful view. But then something sharp pierces Izuku's heart, and the boy finds himself swallowing back a watery cough just as Eraserhead speaks.

“Midoriya?”

The name hangs in the air, breaking through the walls Izuku has so carefully built around his mind. He pauses, breath caught in his throat. The air is chilly, as it always is at night. Izuku’s curls tickle his forehead from where they peek out of his hood.

So he does know. Or at least has a pretty good idea.

There’s a small part of Izuku that wants to just say *yes?* To turn around and admit it all, to get help, because *god* does he need it.

But there’s something stopping him, something that he can’t identify. And it’s telling him not yet. Maybe not ever.

He twists his head around to look at the hero, who’s still staring at him with that sad, awful look on his face. “Isn’t that one of your students? The one that fought the Nomu?”

Eraserhead doesn’t say anything, doesn’t have to.

Izuku turns back around and starts away again. “Maybe if he’d been faster you wouldn’t be in those casts.”

“Kid.”

He doesn’t turn around this time.

It’s pure chance that he ends up at a liquor store.

Eraserhead’s words are still sharp in his mind, playing on loop like a broken record, and the guilt he's been feeling ever since the attack has made way for panic. He's ashamed in himself, ashamed for being so selfish. But at the same time, he can't find it in himself to change his actions. He still has two more people he has to pay a quick visit to. He's gone this far, it'd be unfair to treat these two any differently than the others.

There's only one pair of eyes on his back this time, but it's one that he's familiar with. This one is different than the others. The quirk his follower holds is so, so familiar. Dangerous, but not specifically for Izuku.

His watcher slips away, leaving him alone, which leads Izuku here, standing outside of a building he shouldn’t even be *looking* at.

It’s a quiet little place on the corner of a street, maybe a little rundown, but what can you do? He’s been here twice before; it seems liquor stores are high targets for armed robbery, so Izuku finds himself at places like this a lot. This time, however, he’s here for a different reason than stopping crime.

He can’t help the way his feet carry him inside. The manager—a kind man named Yousuke who looks a little older than his years, but with eyes that are still soft and a smile that instantly puts Izuku at ease—recognizes him. Well, he recognizes Rabbit, not Izuku himself.

He gives him a knowing, sad look, and places a hand on his shoulder once Izuku gets to the front with his item. He seems to get it without

even knowing him. Yousuke doesn't ask for ID. It's obvious he wouldn't get it, secret identity and all, but Izuku doesn't miss the slight disapproving downturn to his lips as he bags it for him. He doesn't ask for money, either, but Izuku slides the wadded up cash across the counter anyway.

Missy has everything she needs and wants; he wouldn't be here if that wasn't the case. He made sure of that before coming here and wasting the last little bit of his money. He hasn't been doing his jobs recently, which means he's going to have to resort to stealing from the rich again in a few days. He can treat himself just this once.

Though this doesn't quite feel like a treat. More of a need. A hunger.

Izuku leaves the store with a knot in his stomach and a nice bottle of vodka curled protectively into his chest, jumping onto the nearest roof while Yousuke watches, sad, as another one starts down a road that he's seen so, so many travel down.

When he gets home, Missy is sleeping soundly. Not a thing is out of place, and yet he knows something is wrong just by stepping inside the doorway. His answer lies in the form of a small piece of paper crumpled up on his desk. The handwriting is sloppy, but Izuku knows who it's from regardless. If the ominous words aren't proof enough, than the dried blood on the corner of the note is.

They're coming for you.

Izuku wants to douse his follower in gasoline and light them on fire, but he instead pours a little bit of the vodka into a nearby mug, not caring that there's some leftover coffee in it from who knows how long ago. It's actually better that way; he's not a fan of drinking vodka neat.

This is wrong, he knows. He's too young, and he really shouldn't, and once he starts now he knows he might not ever be able to go back, but he just can't *sleep.* Can't get his mind to turn off. Every time he blinks he sees All for One's grin, the manic light in his brother's eye—he can't sleep, and he's not coping, and he's not okay, and maybe. Just maybe. He can find a little relief at the bottom of his cracked Mirko mug.

It tastes like shit. It's bitter and it burns and he's choking and for one long second he's back there, suspended in air, suffocating and clawing at the large hand wrapped around his throat as he desperately tries to break free in time to stop his brother's hand from touching Tsuyu's face. Black dots corner the edges of his vision, and all he can see is the

blood pooling around Aizawa's limp form, filling up the miniature crater around his head and body, Mineta's petrified face, All Might's trembling form—but then he can breathe, as the burn starts to fade, as it melts into something more bearable, a warm and heavy weight in his stomach. It works loose the knot that's been there since his meeting with Eraserhead, and he can breathe. He still sputters a bit, but by the second pour he's figured out how to take it slow and easy so that it flows over his tongue, down the back of his throat. He doesn't quite enjoy it, but he's starting to calm down. His senses are dialing down, from a thirteen all the way to a nice, calm six.

Extract doesn't bother him much when he's like this.

The world is fuzzy around the edges, fuzzy and soft in a way that's inviting. Like one of those good dreams (has he ever had good dreams? He can't remember) that make you want to roll over and fall back asleep even though your alarm is buzzing in your ear and you just *know* you have to get up and face the music, but just *not yet.*

He's still going strong by the time the second mug is done, as his enhancements make it nearly impossible to get drunk like this, but that doesn't mean he keeps going. The edge is gone, and that's all he needed. He can bear it all for a little while longer.

He falls onto his chair and rests his head on his desk, the coolness calming his headache just slightly. He needs to work. He still has things he needs to do before the sun comes up. He grabs a random journal from the pile stacked on the shelf and turns on his monitors. He has to finish this report for one of his clients or else he won't get paid. He can't afford that, not now.

"You haven't slept for over forty-six hours."

Izuku frowns at AINA's voice. He doesn't remember putting her on charge, but oh well. He's not doing very well right now. Wait, how long has he been writing? He swears he just opened his notebook and logged onto his computer. Also, when was the last time he ate? Drinking with an empty stomach isn't a very good idea. "Hush. I'm working right now."

"But studies say that you should get a minimum of six hours of sleep every __"

"Mute." He fists his hair, realizing that maybe drinking wasn't the best idea with his sickness. Every breath drags at the inside of his throat like daggers, and he pops another pill into his mouth. Spinning around

in his rolling chair, he sees Missy staring at him with narrowed eyes. She jumps off the couch and treads closer, jumping onto his desk to get right in his face. It's that little action that sends Izuku spiraling even further.

Did I wake her up? Is she trying to comfort me? Fuck.

“I hate myself so much,” he whispers, surprising even himself. It sounds choked. Cracked. Aching.

It’s not quite a cry, and it’s not quite steady either. Is this what he's come to now?

The cat paws at his nose. It’s gentle and not at all forceful, and Izuku lets out a watery laugh.

It’s like the feline is trying to tell him something but doesn’t know how. There’s a look in her eye, steady and kind, and Izuku thinks faintly that he’s probably going insane if he’s getting this emotional over a cat.

That's okay, the look seems to say, *I’ll love you enough for the both of us.*

Chapter End Notes

> Alcohol tastes better when you’re underage because the secret ingredient is crime.
> The beginning of this chapter was inspired by this song.
> o

out of time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say Izuku is tired is an understatement.

His entire life he's been under the impression that alcohol wakes you up. It's a stimulant, right? So why wouldn't it? But right now, as he's frantically running through UA's open gates and scrambling for the entrance, he feels like the living incarnation of death. And not the fun kind of death—the sickly, sluggish, shriveled up kind of death. He feels disgusting.

It turns out that alcohol is actually more of a depressant than a stimulant, a fact that AINA helpfully told him *after* he downed half the bottle of vodka the night before. So yeah. He's feeling just fantastic.

He barely manages to make it to class on time, almost slipping as he rounds the corner thirty seconds before the last bell. He throws open the door and thanks the heavens that Aizawa isn't there yet.

Being late for a second time would've been embarrassing. Izuku barely managed to take a shower and put on his school uniform this morning, so there's no way he could've handled a lecture from Iida or, god forbid, Aizawa himself. In fact, all social interaction should be kept to a minimum for the next week.

It's for the best.

His head is pounding, his body trembling as his metabolism works through his latest coffee monstrosity. Today's concoction (and hangover cure) was the most fun to make by far. Izuku put a generous scoop of coffee grounds into the machine this morning and poured two Monster energy drinks—both being different flavors—into the place where the water would normally go. He added in a bottle of Five Hour Energy and then some sugar, though the sugar could've very well been cocaine—he wouldn't have been able to tell the difference in his current state of mind.

It doesn't taste half bad, which is surprising. He's definitely going to be making it again.

"Jesus Christ," Kacchan hisses, turning around in his chair to glare at

him. Huh. Izuku doesn't remember walking to his seat. "Are you even sober right now, Shitku?"

Does he really look that bad? He took a shower this morning, so he thought he would be in the clear. It appears not.

"I am..." He pauses, scrunching up his nose to find the right words. "Moderately functional."

"I'll take that as a no."

Izuku is about to reply when Aizawa walks into the room, his steps noticeably a little steadier than before. It's probably a front, though.

"As you all know," Aizawa starts, hobbling towards his podium, "the Sports Festival is in two weeks. Regular classwork will be postponed from here on out to help you prepare for it." His gaze rakes over each individual student when they all erupt into cheers, and Izuku fights back a shiver when the unnerving glare lingers on him before moving down the line. "We'll be focusing on honing our skills until then. But before that, I have another announcement."

The mood dampens immediately at the ominous tone. Everyone is anxious, but Izuku is too far gone to feel the same way. *Do fish get thirsty?*

"Principal Nezu has decided it'd be in our best interest to host parent-teacher conferences in light of the attack. It's to put your families at ease, so to speak. We've already received concerns from other parents outside of the hero course, so this doesn't just apply to you all." As if on cue, the overhead projector flickers on. "It'll be held a week after the festival, so mark this date and time on your calendars."

It's only when Kacchan throws a balled-up piece of paper at his cheek that Izuku zones back in, and *fuck.* This is—this is probably not good. It's a parent-teacher conference, meaning a *parent* has to be there; an actual person. Izuku can't just forge signatures this time.

Yeah, this isn't good at all. He needs to nip this in the bud. Immediately.

Izuku, against his better judgment, hangs back after morning classes are finished. He was too lost in thought to actually take any notes, much less pay attention, and he only hopes that none of his teachers noticed. But he can't be bothered with that right now; he has to come up with a plan.

The lunch bell has stopped ringing by the time Izuku convinces Kacchan to go on ahead, and he watches as his friend scares Iida and Uraraka away from him as well. He sends the pair what he hopes is a reassuring smile (but what probably comes out more like a grimace) and waits for his teacher to notice him first.

It doesn't take long.

"What is it, Midoriya?" Aizawa isn't even looking at him, he's just carefully pulling papers off of the desk with his capture weapon and shuffling them into a folder. Izuku inwardly marvels at the level of skill his teacher is showing so effortlessly. It's clear, however, that Aizawa is doing this on purpose. It's almost like he's ignoring Izuku. But why?

The boy's brain is working at a pace slower than Internet Explorer, so it's only a few long seconds into the silence that Izuku notices the elephant in the room. Oh. Fuck. Yeah, this is *not* the best idea. How could Izuku have forgotten what his teacher said to him just a day before?

"Midoriya."

Aizawa's tone is exasperated, shaking Izuku out of his stupor. He clenches his hands into fists at his side and puts on his metaphorical mask. "My dad is on a business trip in America, sensei. He won't be back until next month." The words taste foul on his tongue. Lying to Aizawa is always the hardest. "I don't think he'll be able to attend the conference."

The man stops for a moment, seemingly lost in thought, before resuming his task at a much slower rate. "It's an important meeting, Midoriya. Is there anyone else that can step in? Like your mother?"

Extract stirs at the last word, and Izuku does a full-body flinch. Doesn't Aizawa know that his mother isn't in the picture? He has a feeling his teacher asked that deliberately.

"No, sir."

Aizawa finally straightens up and glances at him, setting every nerve in Izuku's body on edge. "Who are you staying with?"

"A neighbor." The words are casual and practiced. At least Izuku's last remaining braincell is pulling its weight.

“Hm.”

The folder is slid neatly into Aizawa’s bag as the man continues to pack his belongings with his scarf. He’s biding his time, Izuku thinks. He's coming up with what to say.

After a few moments that Izuku spends anxiously glancing at the clock (Kacchan gets angry if he cuts his eating time short), Aizawa stops and levels him with a blank stare. “If you really don’t have anyone who can make it, I’ll have to give you the paperwork I’d normally give your parent. Make sure to get it signed as soon as possible. You’ll still be required to attend the meeting, however, parent or not.”

That’s fine. It’s not ideal, but Izuku can force himself to sit and listen to Aizawa drone on about UA and his grades for thirty minutes if he has to. It's going to be tough, but he can deal.

Izuku assures his teacher that he’ll be there and get the paperwork signed (forging his father’s signature is something of a hobby for him), but his feet hesitate at the door, not letting him leave.

Should he... say something? About last night? No, that would be stupid. Izuku tried to play it off then, as unbelievable as his acting probably was, so going back on that now—the morning after it happened—would probably make him look *incredibly* stupid. And childish. And *indecisive.* All the things that Izuku actually is.

Sensei, I...

What could he even say? Nothing, really. He doubts Aizawa would want him to say anything that’s not a direct confession anyway. If he’s not bringing it up, Izuku shouldn’t either.

The boy glances back and jerks when he notices Aizawa staring right at him, face shadowed. He can’t leave the classroom fast enough then, and it’s not long before he’s seated at his table next to Kacchan, his own bento box in front of him. It’s not often that he brings stuff from home for lunch, but yesterday he bought some cheap canned foods on sale, and he figured he might as well eat it here since he never feels like eating anytime else.

Who knew that alcohol makes you *hungry as fuck?*

“Do you even sleep anymore?” Kacchan hisses at him, nose wrinkled in disgust as he watches his friend stare sightlessly at the wall as he eats. Izuku doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He feels fine, and

just because he *looks* like he'll fall over at the faintest breeze doesn't mean he will.

Izuku shrugs. "I scheduled a nap for a week from next Tuesday."

"Fucking hell, Deku." Kacchan shoves him in the side as he angrily shovels a piece of fish into his mouth. "If you don't start sleeping I'll just knock you out every day after school."

Izuku doesn't doubt the validity of that statement. "Such chivalry," he mocks, bringing another bite of food to his lips.

It's only then that Kacchan stops suddenly, eyes narrowing as he gets a good look at his friend's chopsticks. Izuku quirks a brow and frowns, silently wondering why his mood changed so quickly.

"Deku." Kacchan sounds resigned. "Is that cat food?"

The world comes to a screeching halt around him. Iida and Uraraka, who were previously in a conversation about one of their next classes, turn to stare at him.

Izuku glances at his bento box, then at Kacchan. "Huh?" He says intelligently.

Now that he pointed it out, Izuku can definitely tell that it's Missy's wet food. He must've opened the can this morning and mistaken it for one of the human foods he bought at the store yesterday.

Kacchan is howling in laughter beside him, but Izuku is too busy rethinking life.

I ate almost the whole can. Why did no one stop me. Nothing matters anymore.

As Izuku feels his soul descend to the fifth level of hell, he's suddenly hit with a terrifying question.

What did I feed Missy?

Shouta doesn't know quite when he figured it out.

There's just too many details now that support his musings for him to know exactly when it first started. Over the past year, he's fought alongside Rabbit hundreds of times. He's talked with him, joked with him, and even shared some of his own stories with the kid. He knew about Midoriya, too, through many different people. Tsukauchi, for one, and then Hizashi and All Might.

Granted, he didn't know until the entrance exam that the kid his husband talked a lot about was actually Midoriya, but still.

Shouta knew, even from the beginning, how similar Midoriya and Rabbit were. And so maybe, at the very back of his mind, he's always known about the connection between the two.

But the more he thinks about it, the more he wonders. He's sitting at the dining table in his apartment, the room dark except for the one light shining in the kitchen. Rabbit's file is spread out in front of him, certain sections of the papers and reports highlighted and circled. Midoriya's own file lays, unmarked, in the center of it all.

So, so many details, so many clues that have been left behind for him to find, whether intentionally or not. Shouta feels stupid now that it's all laid out in front of him.

He remembers a notebook falling open onto his lap, remembers the multitude of notes that glared back at him when he briefly read through its contents.

"You do this stuff for fun?"

"It's more of a hobby."

Midoriya gave him a detailed report on the USJ attack despite Shouta not asking for one. At the time he chalked it up to the boy being restless and guilty. He assumed it was a coping mechanism, as sick as it sounds, and he didn't question Midoriya further, but now he can see that there's more to it than he previously thought.

Shouta gave the book to Nezu after reading through it, and the mammal had instantly gone into his sadistic mode, paws flipping the pages as his beady eyes scanned over the scrawled words at the speed of light.

He moves to stand, but Nezu clears his throat, returning to his calm demeanor. "One more thing before you go, Aizawa. What are your thoughts on Midoriya Izuku?"

"My thoughts?" Shouta echoes gruffly, eyes narrowing.

What is he planning?

"I merely ask because I have found some discrepancies concerning Midoriya's role in the USJ attack and his report on it." Nezu holds his chin with a paw, twirling a pen almost thoughtfully. "There are bits of information in here that, logically speaking, Midoriya should not know, or even have access to. It is possible he gained second-hand accounts from his peers, however even then the level of intellect shown here is nothing short of remarkable."

Shouta feels the hairs at the back of his neck stand up. "He is very thorough in his analyses," he agrees slowly. "I assumed Midoriya must have put the pieces together during the attack."

Nezu hums, letting the pen fall back onto his desk. "It's very interesting to me how my access to some of the USJ's camera footage has been—how do I put this? Revoked, at a time like this."

And that gains Shouta's full attention. He straightens up in his chair, eyes wide. "You can't review the videos?"

"Don't get too upset, Aizawa," Nezu waves him off. "It's only one part of it, though regrettably the part I looked forward to seeing the most, as it would've helped a lot in filling in the blanks regarding Shigaraki's motives. I am, however, concerned that this happened just a day or so before Midoriya handed you this report."

And oh, the pieces are starting to fall together. It's clear what Nezu is trying to get at.

Shouta clenches his hands. "Are you suggesting that Midoriya has something to do with it?"

Are you suggesting that he's the traitor, *goes unsaid, but not unheard.*

Nezu smiles, but it's too pointy and cruel to ever put Shouta at ease. "Of course not. I am merely widening the range of possibilities. I am sure Midoriya is one of the brightest in your class, and his notes on the attack will be of great use to this investigation. I just cannot help but wonder how he obtained this level of information."

Something cold settles at the bottom of Shouta's stomach. He wants to throw up.

It sounds plausible, and that's what makes it worse. The idea of there being a traitor is sickening, even more so at said traitor being one of his students. Being Midoriya, more specifically.

A kid that he *invited to this school. A kid that* he *pushed to try out for the exam.*

"What are you going to do?" Shouta breathes out, jaw tight.

"At the moment, absolutely nothing," Nezu answers. "There is nothing to do without concrete evidence. I do suggest, however, that you keep a close eye on your student, Aizawa. He is very peculiar, indeed. Though I sincerely doubt he is the traitor, it seems to me there is more to this story than we would prefer there to be."

Shouta nodded then, recognizing the dismissal. And while the idea of there being a traitor seems less and less plausible with each passing day, he can't help but shiver when he's reminded of the boy.

Midoriya Izuku is dangerous, that's for sure.

There has always been something about him that constantly has Shouta on edge. As if the trouble he threatens to create is of an entirely different sort than Shouta's used to. He thinks of Rabbit, at how the vigilante fights and talks to criminals every day he goes out on patrol, as if there's a certain thrill to it that keeps him going. And the fact that Shouta can recognize this in both Rabbit and Midoriya is concerning.

If only he saw it all sooner.

Shouta watches the way Midoriya interacts with his peers. The kid is not as innocent as everyone thinks. The people that claim otherwise haven't seen what his notebooks contain or heard how he mumbles under his breath while in a daze.

Midoriya is always looking around without seeming to, eyes taking stock of his surroundings. Of course, it isn't all that unusual for young kids, especially ones who live in the heart of Japan, to be aware of their surroundings. To look around, to keep an eye out for danger.

But the boy never fully relaxes, even in the presence of pro heroes, even at UA. And now that he's thinking about it, Shouta realizes that

it's almost like he's *more* tense in those situations.

Midoriya enjoys himself, sure. He laughs and jokes and talks with his friends like any other teenager, and yet his eyes never stop darting away. His muscles never fully relax. Every movement is always deliberate, from when he walks into class to when he eats meals at lunch to when he faces villains at inconvenient times, his expression always displeased, but not surprised. Not worried.

Never has the boy actually looked worried. Which is, well, confusing.

Shouta is willing to admit that Midoriya is something of a conundrum. The kid is on edge—nervous without actually seeming afraid of anyone. Wary. A stray dog with its hackles permanently up. Sure, you're welcome to approach. To talk. To pet. But you better be careful.

Of what, Shouta isn't sure. Will Midoriya run, or will he bite?

He tells his friends he's always cold, but Shouta knows better. He's seen when the child shifts in his clothes or adjusts his sleeves. There's cuts there, bruises and burns that no child his age should have. Shouta got a glimpse of the scarring on Midoriya's stomach that day at the police station, when the kid was out cold and the doctor gave him a quick check-over. Shouta arrived in the middle of it and immediately walked out, feeling a little queasy.

He never thought a kid could have a scar like that. He can only guess what the rest of his body looks like.

The bruises on Midoriya's arms fade away within days of the man first spotting them at school. So they're not bad, Shouta reasons. Or they're nearly healed anyway. He doesn't seem to shy away from his peers when they brush past him or hug him, but his eyes follow their every movement. He's always aware. Always ready.

Shouta might have done some light digging on Midoriya after the USJ, and he was surprised to learn that the boy's mother disappeared on him when he was just turning six. His father allegedly took him in for a couple of years before finally going for legal custody.

The only reason Shouta mentioned the boy's mother at all was to test him. Rabbit told him once before that he lives with *both* his parents, so he merely wanted to see Midoriya's reaction and compare his answer to previous ones.

The kid never talks about his parents. But he's never seemed overly upset when Bakugou or someone would bring up the topic of his father at lunch or during study hall. Any mention of his mother, though, and he's usually left flustered. So the hero learned very quickly to refrain himself from asking about his home life lest he wanted to make Midoriya uncomfortable.

Like today, for example.

"Who are you staying with?"

"A neighbor."

The words were too smooth, too open and falsely honest. If Shouta didn't spend years as an underground hero, he probably would have believed the lie. But he's learned to look for people's tells, and Shouta pretty quickly realized that Midoriya doesn't have any in his body language. It's his voice, and if you weren't looking for it, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between Midoriya's lie and truth.

He's practiced in that, Shouta thinks. Deceiving.

Which means he was being deliberate. He knew exactly what he was doing and probably prepared for a question like that.

Shouta remembers his first exchange with the boy outside of school. When he escorted Midoriya home after catching him stealing some files from Tsukauchi. He remembers when the kid said that his father doesn't care what he does all day and night. The boy, instantly realizing his mistake, hurried to correct himself, arms waving in the air as if to fan the statement away. That entire conversation was peculiar. And then there's the bruises. The guarded body language.

Shouta knew, even then, what the signs were pointing to, but something didn't quite fit.

And so when he got Midoriya as a student, he wanted to press him about his parentage. But he knew that the boy wouldn't take kindly to Shouta butting into his business, so he refrained.

Everything's falling into place now, however, almost like a puzzle.

Shouta was admittedly a little out of it during the attack, but he swears he remembers some things about Midoriya's conversation with Shigaraki that just don't make sense in the slightest. On top of that, Asui apparently gave Tsukauchi a helpful recount of the two's fight

since Nezu couldn't access the footage, but there were gaps in the information. Not even Midoriya himself went into too much detail about what happened.

And in a way, Shouta understands. The attack was traumatic, so it's only natural for some of the students to repress it—but it's still weird. It felt more like Midoriya was *withholding* the information, not that he just didn't remember or know it.

He thinks back to the knife the kid had. The knife that Tsukauchi found covered in the Nomu's blood on the ground. The one that the detective had shakily handed to him, with clear panic in his eyes, after showing him the Rabbit initials engraved on the blade. The markings were small, just above the hilt and nearly undetectable, but obviously belonging to that of the vigilante.

So they concluded then that Rabbit was at the USJ, and, unless he was one of the villains, Shouta knows that it had to have been Midoriya.

And for Midoriya to have been wielding that same knife, claiming that it belonged to one of the downed criminals? It's too good of a coincidence. The two's similar quirks. The similar build and high-pitched voices, the same bags as deep as the ocean under their eyes.

And the fighting styles.

Shouta specifically remembers how he calmed down in those minutes of fighting alongside Midoriya during the attack. Everything felt normal. Right. Aside from the fear and panic threatening to consume him at that moment, Shouta felt hopeful.

He almost had a heart attack when he saw the news last Friday night about Rabbit's escape from the police. He was waking up from a quick nap and wandering into the kitchen for some food when he heard the word Rabbit on the TV.

The fear and rage that washed over him at that moment almost knocked him off his feet, and Shouta thinks about the conversation he had with the vigilante after the stunt.

Rabbit—Midoriya?—apologized to him. Not for not being there, but for *not doing his best.* How could he have done his best if he wasn't there to begin with? The wording didn't sit well with Shouta. He thinks that maybe that was the straw that finally broke the camel's back.

And there's one more thing, too. On Friday morning, Shouta walked into the teacher's lounge to find All Might giggling at his phone screen. Being in a surprisingly okay mood, Shouta asked him what he was laughing about. He didn't actually expect the number one hero to answer truthfully, and he certainly didn't expect to be shown a ton of pictures of his student's cat.

A cat that has a striking resemblance to the same cat Rabbit has showed him a picture of before. The vigilante never told Shouta her name, so he didn't bother asking All Might the name of the cat on his phone to act as a comparison. But the point remained.

With everything else piling up on top of the reasons why Midoriya is probably Rabbit, the similar cats theory doesn't seem too far fetched.

Shouta glares down at the files in front of him. Why couldn't he have seen it all before? It would've saved him so many gray hairs.

"Sho?" Hizashi's voice comes from the hallway. He looks like he just woke up. "Babe, c'mon. It's late."

He doesn't fight his husband like he would've any other time, instead letting himself be dragged to their shared bedroom. His mind is still running a million miles per second.

Because the fact remains that even if Midoriya isn't actually Rabbit, his student would still have a lot of problems Shouta would need to question him about. Being a vigilante who fights crime all day and night would explain the bruises and scarring on the boy's body—so Shouta can only hope that that's the case.

If Midoriya is *just* Midoriya, things will become complicated, because that means he's getting his injuries from home.

That might not be too far off, though.

He's seen the way the kid's eyes gloss over, like he's seen something, like some part of him doesn't work anymore, and sometimes Shouta wonders how bright his eyes used to shine before shit started hitting the fan.

He sees the glint in the boy's gaze when he studies his classmates, who are oblivious to the whole thing. He sees the words that are on the tip of his tongue, the words that he chooses not to use. He sees how perceptive the boy is, and it scares him, because Midoriya probably knows that he knows.

Midoriya Izuku is dangerous, and Shouta is scared.

Not for what he might do to his classmates or to others—no, for what he might do to himself.

“You really think it’s him, huh?”

Shouta blinks, not realizing Hizashi was still awake. He sighs before turning over in the bed to stare at his husband. “It has to be. I’ll be surprised if it’s not.”

“It would make sense,” Hizashi concedes after a moment, yawning. “The listener is always alone at the laundromat. Always wearing the same clothes and spewing the same lie about his father. You think he lives by himself?”

And isn’t that a question? Rabbit and Midoriya have told him two differing stories regarding their life at home, so it’s hard to figure out which one is the truth. “It’s a possibility. He could’ve lied on both accounts to save his skin.”

“I can see that,” Hizashi nods thoughtfully, his long blond hair shining in the moonlight filtering in through the window.

Shouta is overcome by a sudden sense of warmth and fondness. He relaxes further into the mattress and faces Hizashi once more, voice quiet. “Can you keep an eye on him for me? I don’t think the kid has been doing well lately. You should’ve seen him the other day, ‘Zashi. I was worried.”

The voice hero’s gaze softens, and it’s not just because of his exhaustion. “‘Course I will, babe. Now please go to sleep before I throw out all the coffee. I need to take out my hearing aids.”

Shouta huffs out a laugh and tries to focus on something other than his current dilemma. The rest of his casts are coming off tomorrow, a lot earlier than he suspected. There’s a little more than a week until the festival now, and he’s already dreading that. The teachers have already started placing bets on who will win.

When Shouta finally gets his mind to shut off for a while, Hizashi is sound asleep next to him. Sighing contently, he curls up next to his husband and almost kicks one of the cats sleeping at his feet. He feels strangely calm all of a sudden, and yet he can’t help but think that there’s something missing.

Shouta is surprised that Midoriya—no, *Rabbit* even comes to their Friday night meeting. He honestly didn't expect him to after the way their last conversation went. And yet, despite how tense the air becomes once Rabbit hops onto a nearby air conditioner from out of nowhere, nearly scaring Shouta half to death in doing so, the hero can't help the wave of relief that runs through him.

"You got your casts off already?" Rabbit says, voice slightly mocking. Shouta has no doubt the boy already knew this, however. "Pretty sure you're not supposed to be out here patrolling just yet. Aren't you supposed to be taking it easy?"

Shouta lets one of his rare smiles slip through, face partially hidden by his capture weapon. "And when have I ever listened to doctor's orders, kid?"

Rabbit laughs, and it's a nice sound. Easy on the ears. Childish. Shouta feared the kid would ignore him, or, better yet, argue with him some more. He feels his chest loosen now that he knows he hasn't shattered their already fragile relationship. They're still okay. He can still watch over him and make sure he's safe.

Shouta doesn't know what he would've done had Rabbit decided to strip him of that privilege.

"Patrol?" He offers, a clear peace offering. He can still see how tense Rabbit is in the way he crouches in front of the other on the AC unit, shoulders set and jaw clenched, and he wants to change that. He doesn't want him to feel that way around him *ever*.

"I thought you'd never ask," Rabbit replies, a newfound glint to his crimson eyes, making Shouta breathe out a sigh of relief.

Rabbit takes the lead this time. The duo go down their usual route and do whatever work they can find, just like always, though Shouta notes that they go down a few extra streets than normal. Rabbit must've added them to their patrol just recently.

Shouta may be a little reckless sometimes, but he's not stupid. He makes sure not to get into the middle of the fights they stumble across, instead serving more as backup and extra support for the teen. Erasure is more than helpful by itself, especially when you add his capture weapon to the mix.

He doesn't have to try too hard to stay away, as Rabbit doesn't seem to be giving any of the criminals a chance to get near him. It's like he's guarding him, and any other time Shouta probably would have gotten annoyed at the gesture, but now he's just happy that he's allowed to be patrolling with the kid at all.

As they make their way through the night, Shouta debates asking him about their last meeting. He just needs a confirmation, that's all. Would he just make it worse? Shouta is pretty sure he's right, so does he even need Rabbit to confirm it? He'd be risking a lot.

Would getting him to admit it even be useful? I won't be able to do anything without breaking his trust, and I doubt I'd be able to convince him to let me help him. Damnit, this is difficult.

"I could die for a smoothie right now."

Shouta curses and dodges another bullet, slamming the gang member against the wall with his scarf as he's brought out of his thoughts. Fuck. His hands are aching again and he hasn't even used them a lot. "We're in the middle of a firefight right now, kid. Do you *really* think that's an appropriate metaphor?"

"Hyperbole, actually."

The patrol was uneventful right up until the very end. Of course they had to run into two parties having an all-out war with each other over some stupid reason. It reminds Shouta of that gang fight he broke up with Rabbit that day.

"Come on!" The vigilante calls. "You can't tell me you're not thirsty right now! A smoothie sounds *so good."*

He is a little parched, but that's not the point. Shouta finds himself blowing out an amused breath as he takes down another beefy guy, knocking him unconscious with ease. "I'll buy you one after this, now focus before you get yourself killed."

At the promise of a nice drink, Rabbit seems to sober up. His steps become quicker, his blows harder and more precise all of a sudden,

and Shouta can't help but marvel at how quickly the vigilante changed. It seems he holds back more than he lets on.

Shouta makes quick work of his own targets and shakes his head. "You fight like you're running out of time, kid."

And if Shouta looked, he would've seen the way Rabbit froze up at the comment, his eyes glazing over briefly. But Shouta is too busy tying up the criminals to see it, and he's left unaware as a consequence. In this moment he misses the only detail he would've needed to finally put together what was really happening, right there under his nose.

And he'll come to regret it.

When Eraserhead swings himself up onto the roof after getting the snacks, the first thing Izuku notices is the shakiness. He has two drinks in his hands, one of them being what looks like Izuku's promised smoothie, and his arms are trembling slightly with the effort of holding them steady. It's noticeable enough to make Izuku grit his teeth out of frustration. Not at Eraserhead, at himself.

He glares sourly at the hero but takes the drink when offered it. Eraserhead insisted on going into the store alone, claiming that it'd only cause trouble if they were seen together, which, to be fair, actually makes sense. Eraserhead is technically breaking the law every time he sees Rabbit and fails to turn him in, so what would happen if they were both caught shopping for snacks at ass o'clock in the morning? Nothing good, that's for sure.

This doesn't stop Izuku from pouting, though. His teacher should *not* be using his arms this much. He does shit like this and *still* has the audacity to lecture Izuku over his own unhealthy habits. What a hypocrite.

Izuku sits down near the ledge and plops onto his back, feet hanging off the side as he starts to swing them childishly. He's just about to inhale the entirety of the smoothie (a healthy one, much to Izuku's

annoyance) in one go when something light drops on his chest.

It's a Slim Jim. One of the more expensive, less-greasy ones you find at the nicer convenience stores. Izuku does a double take once he finally manages to read the label in the faint light because *oh.* This is the exact kind that Present Mic buys him. The exact size and flavor, too.

Eraserhead is studying him. He's watching for a reaction, obviously. Is it just Izuku, or does he look almost smug? It's like he's teasing him. Like he knows exactly why Izuku would get upset over it.

That slimy bastard.

The obvious amusement on his teacher's face tells Izuku that he's all too aware of his inner turmoil, which serves to further annoy the vigilante. Oh, so he wants to be like *that.*

(Izuku's own theory has changed now. The chances of Present Mic being Eraserhead's secret lover has increased to 95%, and with each passing second the percentage grows exponentially higher.)

Yeah, Eraserhead definitely knows who Rabbit is. The meeting last week was a guess, a venture into the dark, but all of that unsureness seems to have been wiped away. Now he's just trying to trip him up, to get him to admit the truth himself so he won't be blamed for pushing him later on.

He's that petty, huh? The thought makes Izuku smile despite the fear worming its way into his gut.

It's kind of funny, he thinks, that tonight of all nights you can see the stars. It's a rare treat, finding the perfect spot in the city where you can catch a glimpse of them. This moment feels important somehow. Like he'll never be able to feel this again, like he'll never be able to *see* this again.

The week is starting to catch up with him, and Izuku suddenly feels a huge wave of exhaustion overcome him. He really does need to sleep one of these days. His week hasn't been the greatest and it's not even over yet.

Eraserhead drops down beside him and mimics his pose, back creaking as he rests on the cold concrete and starts on his own beverage.

And everything is so familiar, so domestic, that Izuku's mind can't

help but wander. The boy has looked death in the face and laughed countless of times, and yet he's still here. He's survived for this long, despite everything the universe has thrown his way. So of course the only time his life is truly in danger is when Izuku can't do a damn thing about it.

He can't stop it this time. Can't do anything but wait.

Izuku has never been good at waiting.

Eraserhead has avoided death plenty of times as well, Izuku knows. The bandages on his face are proof of that. The hero thankfully has more tomorrows, though, and Izuku thinks about the ones he won't be a part of.

"Do you want a family?" He asks, because he needs something to hold onto. He needs to know his teacher will make it count. The doctor's words are still hanging at the back of his mind, impossible to forget and even more so to repeat. Saying it aloud would make it final, make it *real,* and he doesn't think he can do that just yet.

There's a beat of silence.

"Yeah," Eraserhead says, his voice strained. "I do."

"I think you'd be a great dad, Mothman."

Eraserhead glances at him briefly and looks back up at the sky. He doesn't talk for a long moment, but Izuku doesn't mind. They're both searching the stars for different answers.

And if Izuku was more careful, more alert, he would've seen the flash of pain in Eraserhead's eyes when he looked at him out of the corner of his vision. Would've seen the mild frustration that laid in their dark depths.

But for now, Izuku just lets himself be there while he can.

Chapter End Notes

mom said it's my turn to be the antagonist

t

before the fall

Chapter Notes

(warnings: briefly implied/referenced child abuse; bullying)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I hate school. I hate the homework, the people, the quirks, and I hate this fucking *essay*. How the hell am I supposed to complete this in one day?”

There’s slight static from above. *“I was under the impression Cementoss gave you a week to complete this assignment, Izuku. Is it not your own fault you started it with only a few hours before the deadline?”*

Izuku gasps dramatically, feeling betrayed, and glares up at the ceiling. “Blasphemy! I’ll have you know I’ve been busy this entire time. This isn’t my fault.”

Not this time, at least.

“According to Eraserhead,” AINA’s voice changes to that of a familiar hero’s, *“fighting crime is not an acceptable excuse for neglecting your responsibilities and schoolwork.”*

Dammit. Izuku doesn’t know why he even bothers arguing with her. She’s an AI, so of course she’ll win. The boy pinches his nose in displeasure. “What did I say about quoting the hobo man at home? I don’t wanna hear his voice here. It’s bad enough I have to deal with seeing his stupid face every day at school.”

“I’m sure he feels the same way about you, Izuku.”

And okay, wow, that’s uncalled for.

“I don’t remember programming you to be so sassy,” he mutters, turning back to his work. He chooses to ignore AINA’s sarcastic reply and flips open his notebook. He still has some time to kill before he has to go out and finish some of his jobs.

There’s less than a week before the Sports Festival, and he’s been trying to save up whatever money he can to buy some last minute necessities.

See, Izuku doesn't have much time left. And he's not just talking about his sickness, he's talking about the eyes that have been watching him around for quite a few days now. His first stalker was kind enough to tip him off about what's going to happen in the form of a very ominous note, and the boy isn't about to waste his newfound advantage.

They're coming for him. And it's not unusual, really, as Izuku has to deal with vengeful criminals and villains on the daily, but this time is different. This is *serious* if it made Izuku's old friend come out of hiding and warn him about it.

He has to leave, and the sooner the better. There's no telling if anyone else knows he lives here, and he doesn't want to wait and find out the hard way.

All he needs to disappear is a fake ID and passport, along with some cash. He won't be able to take Missy with him, as that would put her in danger, so Izuku's best bet is leaving her with Kacchan. It'll just be for a little while, of course. Izuku isn't planning on leaving forever. A month or so should be enough time for everything to calm down, and only then will he come back and resume his work.

But where should he even go? America? His father wouldn't dare go over there to search for him, so it's the best choice for Izuku. He knows a ton of languages, so he'll be fine pretty much anywhere, but America seems like the right choice.

That doesn't mean he wants to leave his home, though, even if it's only temporary.

Izuku flips through his notebook, eyes briefly skimming the pages. He doesn't know what he's doing anymore. The essay is long-forgotten, not that he would care either way. His grades started out perfect, but this past week has really taken its toll on him. So what if he's slipping? He'll be expelled soon enough.

If he doesn't leave by then.

He turns another page and stops. All Might's signature stares back at him, and the sloppy handwriting and little face next to the name has Izuku suddenly feeling queasy. Oh. Throughout all of this, he hasn't even thought of All Might much.

Guilt hits him like a speeding train, and Izuku thinks he would have preferred a real one.

What will he do about One for All when he leaves? Give it back to All Might? Is that even possible? His mentor has never mentioned anything like that, but then again why would he? That's not really something Izuku would need to know. But still. If it's not possible, should he give it away? And to who? Kacchan is his first choice. But whether or not his friend will accept it is another issue.

One for All doesn't need Kacchan to accept it, though. As bad as it is, Izuku can force it on him if he needs to. That seems like an ideal plan in this situation, as terrible and dangerous as it is.

The only question now is when exactly he's going to leave. Should he wait another few weeks or leave right after the Sports Festival? If he's just going to up and disappear, he might as well go all out. He needs to send one last *fuck you* to his father, and what better way to do that than to absolutely *own* the Festival? All for One will most definitely be watching it now that he knows his son is at UA, so there's no point in trying to hide.

Izuku wouldn't even be thinking about participating if he wasn't going to leave anyway. That's the only thing that's changed.

And besides, if he wins it'll be a slap to All for One's face. A reminder of what he lost, of what he doesn't have anymore. Izuku will leave after that. He can keep them all guessing.

He's petty like that.

Izuku finds himself scribbling in the last few pages of his notebook. Despite all of the evidence pointing to why he should run, he's still going to feel guilty about it. He doesn't want to leave school, he doesn't want to leave behind Missy and Kacchan and his new friends. He doesn't want to stop training with All Might and chatting with Present Mic in English class. And, as much as he hates to admit it, he doesn't want to stop seeing Eraserhead's stupid face every other day on patrol.

That's all been the usual for him as of late, and maybe that's the issue. He's gotten too comfortable, too happy. It's only right for the world to knock him down a few pegs. It just sucks that the USJ had to be the thing that did it.

Izuku writes down notes and seemingly meaningless thoughts on the worn-down, coffee-stained pages. He writes about his plan, about the pros and cons of each choice he could make once he leaves, about the finances and supplies he'll need to make this work.

And then he goes further.

He writes about his doubts, about why he *really* doesn't want to do this but also why he *really* kind of has to. It's frustrating, it's dumb, and it's still not painful enough.

He has so many questions and so little answers to them. And even when he seems to decide on something and manages to cross one of the questions off the list in his mind, ten more seem to take its place.

The pen snaps with the force he's holding it with, and in a moment of heightened irritation, he chucks it across the room.

Izuku hates oversharing in this hellish notebook, because for one, it's not a diary, and two, there's always a possibility someone could read it.

But what's his alternative? Talking to someone? Another human? With words? Yeah, he doesn't fucking think so. He'll stick with his irrational anger and terrible coping mechanisms, thanks.

By the time he makes it out of the house and finishes up some of his jobs, his followers are back. They're still watching him. It's the same eyes and same quirks as the first day. The person who left him that note isn't among them, though, but he's not surprised. That guy was helping him, not harming. He's a would-be friend. An ex-acquaintance. It wouldn't make sense for him to associate with Izuku's other, less passive followers.

He manages to lose them on his patrol that night, but they don't stop there. The next night, it happens again.

He gets up and goes to retrieve his discarded weapons in the alley he's in, feet treading silently across the concrete floor. He just took down a few thugs trying to shake down a poor teen, so he's not really expecting it when *Extract* starts to thrum in his veins.

There's a prickle at the back of his neck, making Izuku freeze for a moment before he continues to pick up his daggers.

He is being watched. Again.

The green-haired boy lets his breathing slow and his eyes slip shut, feeling the vibrations on the ground and the displacement of air from behind him.

One, two, three, four.

Four sets of eyes.

Izuku stretches. He turns around and lifts his forearm, letting AINA scan the perimeter. He'll review her recording later to see what they can find.

The power the intruders are emitting isn't dangerous, no. They seem more curious than anything, almost as if they're amused.

His fingers twitch, wanting to throw one of the blades he holds between his fingers. He could take them all and no one would even know. It would be that simple for just four of them.

But he manages to refrain himself, and the same thing happens for the next few days. Izuku patrols, they watch him for a while, and then they leave. The cycle repeats, and it's always with the same four.

It's not until the fifth day that something changes.

He's walking the streets of the city, finally feeling confident enough to not have to jump rooftops just to avoid getting caught, when suddenly he feels cold; the space around him feels acutely quiet. It feels *wrong.*

The stillness is absolute. A ringing silence presses upon him, and he goes into high alert immediately, feeling his heart start to beat faster as he sets his stolen can of coffee down on the curb.

He feels bad about leaving it, but what can you do in a situation like this? So maybe Izuku shouldn't be walking so freely in a public place like this when he's a wanted vigilante, but that's beside the point.

There's no moon tonight, no light. But Izuku can see well in the dark. Yes, they're there. The four that were watching, as well as an additional five.

Three teams of three. Basic.

Izuku mentally catalogues where he is right now with respects to his stalkers, scenarios and battle plans running through his mind. Perhaps he should move out and set up a barrier with those roadblocks across the street? And maybe set some traps?

No time. Too late.

The intruders break through the first perimeter and are steadily

approaching. They stop just beyond the second one, their quirks a quiet hum at the back of Izuku's brain.

Are they waiting for a signal?

They're too close for his comfort. They usually never go for this bold of an approach. It seems like they don't even care if he notices them this time. Izuku turns quietly and goes back the direction he came. Going home isn't even an option now, as he'd just be setting a deathtrap for himself.

Izuku stuffs his hands into his inner pockets, fiddling with his gadgets, and starts to whistle a low tune.

AINA recognizes it at once, her voice cheery in his earpiece. *"Security measures have been activated. All cameras within a one mile radius will stay deactivated for fifteen minutes, starting now."*

Izuku chances a sly glance at the roof of a building across the street, and he spots two figures watching him. Words are exchanged and unseen weapons gripped. They're ready, waiting. But for what?

He takes another turn down a random road, his thoughts racing, outrage mounting.

He can't rush them yet. They have him surrounded at every angle, and besides, Izuku isn't very familiar with this part of the city. He's at a disadvantage.

Which means he has to make *them* come to *him.* He'll have to pick them off and separate them as they approach. But he'll have to be quick with it. If all nine come at him at once? He's dead meat.

His anger picks up with the wind, and his eyes narrow into dangerous slits. *Seriously? And I was having a good day, too. They just can't get enough of me.*

He can eliminate them all in under a minute if he truly wanted to, or at least take down more than half before making his escape. Not all of the guns he owns are full of tranqs, after all.

What are they thinking? They're only a few blocks away from Endeavor's agency, and everyone knows that the number two hero sends out his sidekicks to patrol these parts at night. Izuku himself has never been caught by one, but he doesn't want to jinx it now.

Many would rather welcome death than be caught by one of Endeavor's patrols.

Abruptly, Izuku feels the energy in the air crackle. He tenses and stops walking, his breath suspended, a sense of danger sweeping over him.

They're moving towards him with inexplicable speed.

There's silence, save for the slight whirring of the wind, then the scuffle of shoes. *Close.*

It's only when Izuku glances at a window's reflection across the street that he notices the masks his pursuers are donning.

The first figure appears on the ledge above him and jumps. His legs haven't even hit the ground yet before Izuku is moving with lightning speed and smashing the man into the wall, the blood staining the brick crimson from where his head knocked into it. Izuku grabs the criminal's outstretched wrist and steals the knife from between his fingers.

Something wet glints off the blade, and Izuku blinks. *Is that poison?*

The vigilante grips it hard and drives it into the pressure point just below the criminal's shoulder, jabbing it again with his elbow to make sure it goes even deeper.

If Izuku's guess is right, the substance coating the knife is just going to put him to sleep. If not, well, he's sure one of his buddies has an antidote on them.

The green-haired boy ducks as a ball of golden fire comes from behind him, singing his hair and costume.

He shoots forward in the same motion and grabs the newcomer's head, cracking it on his knee. The mask splits in two from the sheer force of it, revealing a charred face underneath. *Result of his own fire quirk, maybe.*

He has to stop himself from wincing in sympathy at the sight of the man's burn marks, and he only just has time to cross his arms and call upon *Deflect* when another blast of heat washes over him, sending him back a few feet.

He surges forward, thankful he has his Rabbit costume on to take the brunt of some of the flames. Izuku relishes in the surprise on the

figure's face and pivots, his body alight with power as he kicks the man square in the chest. There's a whirlwind of air and then the guy is sent flying, crashing through the window of a McDonald's.

Okay, that was a bit much.

Izuku is suddenly hyper aware of the screams coming from the couple of scared citizens rounding the corner. With all of this commotion, he figures he has a max of two minutes before heroes arrive on the scene.

His third attacker appears behind him, bringing him out of his thoughts. This one is wearing no mask this time, and Izuku glimpses a pair of sightless eyes, making him shudder.

The vigilante reaches out with his left hand to grab the man's hair and yank him close, but instead Izuku is met with a fist to the throat. Something sharp slices his stomach and he stumbles back, already feeling the warmth spreading across his hoodie and staining it red.

Fuck. Focus, you idiot.

The man keeps at the attacks, not pausing as he barrages Izuku with a flurry of movements almost too quick for him to keep up with.

Izuku lets the dance continue for a few more moments before spotting his opening. He weaves, dodging another slice to his stomach as he uses the criminal's thigh as a stepping stone and wraps his legs around the figure's neck, bringing him to the ground.

Izuku rolls as he falls, quickly pulling out his capture tape and winding it around his attacker's torso. With a grunt, he yanks on the tape and throws the figure up and over the nearest lamplight, effectively hanging him like a piñata.

He doesn't have time to check if he's going to try and escape before the next three arrive, this time attacking in tandem.

Izuku hisses as he jumps up a wall and grabs onto the roof's ledge, more blood leaking out of the cut on his stomach as he pulls himself up. He stares at the trio below him, all poised and ready to charge at a moment's notice.

"I have somewhere to be." Izuku makes sure his voice sounds exasperated and not pained. "Could y'all, like, not do this today?"

There's no reply, only the sound of the wind roaring between them. Izuku faintly hears sirens and rolls his eyes. Damn, yet another fight being cut short.

He lifts an arm and twitches his fingers, making sure to turn his focus into the man's neck. The hooded criminal to the far left starts to gasp, his hands reaching up to slap away the unforeseen force that drags him forward by the throat. Izuku isn't even using *Pull* to its highest potential, he's just trying to catch them off guard.

It's not like they don't know who he is. He recognized the mask on the fire-user's face. These people are mercenaries, though obviously not very good ones. They also most definitely already know about the oddities of his singular *enhancement* quirk, so he's not even going to sugarcoat things.

The others take this as a sign to continue and rush toward Izuku, their blades flashing in the faint light.

Izuku releases his control on the first guy and throws out one of his grenades, pushing the criminals back and effectively giving him enough time to forge his own attack.

There's a rush of air and Izuku feels a searing pain in his side where the closest figure touched him, his costume sizzling away as invisible acid eats away at him. A contact quirk, most likely. He needs to limit the guy's hand movements, then. Biting back a cry, the teenager twists and grabs the man by the throat, using his other arm to snatch his elbow and snap it back. The grip he has on the other's neck is so harsh he's nearly crushing his wind pipes with the sheer pressure he's causing.

Izuku turns and throws him at the other two on the roof, sending them flying off the side. He jumps off the building at their momentary distraction and charges up One for All into his legs as he falls after them.

He crashes into the criminals before they can even touch the ground and uses their bodies like a spring board. The impact releases an explosive-like force, and the ground shudders beneath him.

And *fuck,* that's going to leave a mark. His poor feet are crying right now.

Izuku darts into an alleyway separating two buildings and jumps between the walls to propel himself up even higher. If he looks back

down now he would notice the large crater his attack just caused, along with the limp figures inside of it.

Three more left.

Izuku lands a few paces in front of the group. These last ones seem to have been waiting for him. They merely watched as their teammates attacked him without preamble, not moving an inch.

The one in the middle, most likely the leader, is the one who speaks first. His words are a low rumble. “As expected of the famous vigilante.”

Without breaking the rhythm of his walk, Izuku addresses him with a happy up-tilt to his words. “Tell me who sent you and I might just let you walk out of here without getting your search histories exposed.”

He’s way too tired to be dealing with this shit. He also needs to buy some groceries while he’s out, and the fact that they’re interrupting him right now is pissing him off. Missy needs food.

The leader doesn’t answer and instead brings his hands together to produce a piece of parchment out of thin air.

Izuku shifts to hide his nervousness (he just spawned in paper from nowhere, so who’s to say he can’t do that with a rocket launcher or gun?), and the action sends spikes of pain throughout his body. “You want an autograph? Listen, I love my fans, but this is a little much—all you had to do was ask!”

Bitch Man holds out his hand but doesn’t move forward; a clear invitation. The paper hovers over his palm, just floating there.

Okay, shit. Yeah, they definitely did their research.

Izuku hesitates a few moments longer before doing the same with his own arm, letting *Pull* activate at his fingertips. The paper drifts from the man’s palm and into his own.

“What is this?” He asks, though he has a feeling he already knows. He wouldn’t be so blatantly showing off his quirks if he didn’t already have an idea who they are.

“A message.”

Izuku winces, the only noticeable crack in his carefully-put-up facade.

He doesn't like the way the word *message* sounds on the man's tongue. It doesn't sound like the truth. *Warning* would be a better term.

He doesn't read the note in his hands yet. He'll do that when he has more privacy. He shoves the paper in his pocket and glares at the group, eyeing them suspiciously as their other members join them from the ground.

Now this is the part where Izuku becomes apprehensive. A nine-on-one fight isn't very good odds, not when he's already sore and tired from his incessant patrolling. And besides, the ruckus they're causing has to have already alerted nearby law enforcement.

"Mind introducing yourselves?" He asks, popping out a hip. The urge to run and find a random hero out on patrol who can help him is suddenly much stronger. "It's a little rude that *you* all know who I am but *I* still don't know who you are."

The figure on the far right startles. "You really have no clue who we are?"

That's what I just fucking said. Can they keep up?

"Funny. You'd think the confused look and blank stare would have answered that for you," he sniffs, tipping his head. "He put you guys up to this?"

None of them answer his question, though a few shift on their feet. They look uneasy at the idea of saying his name aloud.

Izuku needs them to hurry up, as he's currently bleeding from the stomach. This is *not* how he expected his night to go.

"Careful," the leader says suddenly, *slowly*. "Once he sees how you get out, he knows how to get in."

And just what *the fuck* does that mean? What kind of dumbfuckery is this dude trying to pull?

Does they know he's planning on leaving? Is that what this is about?

Before he can snap at Bitch Man to elaborate, there's movement out of the corner of his vision, making them all tense up. That's all the warning Izuku needs to get going.

He makes to move towards the next building, only for a rain of

weapons to come flying at him from all sides with deadly precision. He twists in midair when he jumps, *Boost* burning under his skin. He may be faster than most pros, but there's no way he can dodge all of the projectiles aiming straight for him.

A knife lodges into his thigh and he yelps, nearly missing the edge of the next roof entirely. He yanks it out and blindly throws it behind him, not checking to see if it landed its mark before taking off running.

"Damn you," he hisses through clenched teeth. This is just a shitshow now. And why are heroes injuring criminals like this? He's just been *stabbed* for merely existing.

Bullets ring out, and then there are shouts as multiple heroes appear from seemingly nowhere and begin to finish Izuku's job. They don't look like they belong to Endeavor's agency, surprisingly. They must've been called by one of the civilians.

Izuku extends his senses and nearly runs into a clothesline once he realizes that the heroes aren't following him. So they're going after that group instead, huh? Is he not important enough? He tries to push away that offended part of himself, which isn't hard, as in the next second a fresh wave of pain overtakes him.

Oh, yeah. He's bleeding in two places now.

The vigilante listens to the fight unfold as he moves further away, sprinting as fast as he can with his injuries. The group wasn't too hard to deal with, but they were troublesome. Concerning.

In fact, Izuku probably could've done some good damage to them before eventually getting captured by the heroes. No. These villains aren't very well-trained. They don't seem to know how to use their quirks, which is why most of them relied on weapons and hand-to-hand combat.

Izuku knows there's something more meaningful behind the attack, and he knows there must be a reason why his father is *toying with him.* The attackers are obviously a part of the League, or at least in a temporary contract with them, as none of them seemed the least bit surprised at his multitude of quirks.

They know who he is, and thus *what* he is. Which isn't good at all.

It's only when he's halfway across the city that he slows to a stop and

pulls out the dreaded paper. His hands shake on their own volition, and he smooths out the wrinkles in it from when he stuffed it in his pocket.

What stares back at him is one ominous sentence, the handwriting neat and straight and all too familiar: *Just a few more bodies before we meet again, my little hero.*

Izuku feels his heart stop. It's as if All for One is right there next to him, speaking into his ear with that deep, foreboding tone of his. *Extract* stirs and the boy feels sick. The sarcasm in the inked words is so obvious it's almost palpable.

"Izuku, you need to pay atten—"

His foot slips off the edge of the five-story-building, and then Izuku is sent plummeting to the ground. He doesn't even have a chance to cry out before he lands in the inside of a large dumpster, the air leaving his lungs in one gasp.

He lays there, panting, with AINA screaming something in his ear, and blinks away the white dots covering his vision. Yeah, he's definitely lost quite a bit of blood. He needs to patch his wounds up and get back to his house. He can go shopping tomorrow after school. That sounds like a good plan.

Fuck. Now he smells like garbage.

"What are you doing?"

Izuku does *not* scream, thank you very much. He was too distracted by the alarming amount of blood coming out of his body to actually listen for anyone around him, so this is totally on him.

"Your mom," he says immediately, praying that whoever this is won't kill him. To be fair, the chances of two maniacs being in the same alleyway are pretty low. He should be fine.

He opens his mouth again, this time to question why the Probably-A-Murderer is in an alleyway at this time of night, when his body suddenly goes lax, his quirks becoming silent. He feels cold, as if the flowing water in his mind has finally frozen over, and his lips part slightly on their own accord.

And that's when his mind goes fuzzy.

Hitoshi shouldn't be out at this time of night. He really shouldn't.

His foster parents will be upset if they catch him. Hell, they probably already know about this latest adventure of his, but it's not like Hitoshi cares. He knows they won't do anything about it.

They're way too nice, in all respects. Nothing like his other four sets of foster parents. These ones are different, he thinks. Nicer.

Almost too nice, in his opinion. He's been waiting for the hammer to fall, for the shoe to finally drop, but all he's gotten in response to his irritation and difficulty is love and support, and it makes him upset.

He doesn't know what to expect from them, and that's the issue. They don't get angry at him when he does something wrong and they don't hit him like his other foster parents did. They just kind of let it happen, and it's annoying.

This feeling of not knowing, this *change,* is what led to him sneaking out of the house for the third time in as many weeks—if you can even call it sneaking; he just walked out the front door—and strolling the deserted streets.

All he needed was to clear his head, that's all. He planned on a simple walk around the city, but that plan changed the moment he caught sight of some of his old classmates. The very ones who hated his guts for most of the year for no particular reason.

So of course the only logical thing to do was duck inside this alley to avoid being seen by them. Call it cowardice if you want, but for Hitoshi it's survival.

Which leads to now, with Hitoshi hiding in the darker shadows of the alley, leaning behind a fairly large dumpster. It's less than ideal, but it works. His old classmates pass by without a clue to what happened.

Hitoshi is just about to leave and check if the coast is clear when it happens. There's a rush of air, and then a body falls from above and

crashes inside the dumpster he was just leaning on, causing a plume of dirt and grime to billow up in the air.

It's so sudden and out of the ordinary that Hitoshi is frozen, paralyzed with fear, because what the *fuck* is even that? Where did it even *come* from?

There's a groan, and then a head pops into view as the figure sits up. Oh, so it's a human.

"What are you doing?" Hitoshi asks, because at this point this might as well happen. His life is already so goddamn weird, what else can life throw at him? Or, more appropriately, *drop* on him?

The boy startles so hard that Hitoshi would actually feel bad if he wasn't still pissed off from everything else going on. There's a girly screech, and then another pained groan.

"Your mom," he replies seriously, and Hitoshi doesn't waste any time in forming the connection he needs. His quirk is a calming pressure in his skull, a warm blanket covering him up during a cold thunderstorm, and it easily takes control of the other.

Got you.

For a few long seconds, Hitoshi just sits there, because now that he has this person under his hold he doesn't quite know what to do. Is he a villain? No, that can't be right. He sounds like he's the same age as Hitoshi. Maybe just a petty criminal? But that also wouldn't explain why he just dropped from the sky and landed in a dumpster. Is that what criminals do? Wait for unsuspecting civilians to wander into their designated alleys for a chance to freak them the fuck out? Hitoshi wouldn't know.

"Come out of there," he orders, more for his own sake than for the boy's. It's hard to talk to someone when they're on a pile of garbage.

It takes a few moments, but eventually the boy is staggering to his feet inside the dumpster and crawling out of it.

The light of a nearby streetlamp frames the figure's body, illuminating his features, and it's only then that Hitoshi recognizes him. It's the ears that give it away, he thinks, that and the glowing red eyes that seem to stare straight through him rather than at him.

Oh. So this isn't what petty criminals do, this is what *vigilantes* do.

Hitoshi is so shocked that the connection snaps at his loss of focus, and he stumbles back a few steps as the boy—no, as *Rabbit* seems to recollect himself.

I'm so dead. I just brainwashed one of the most wanted criminals in Japan and now I'm going to die. This is it. I shouldn't have snuck out, I shouldn't have snuck out, I shouldn't have—

"Holy shit!" Rabbit's awed voice puts a halt to his frantic musings, and Hitoshi's eyes bug out of his head as the boy continues on enthusiastically. "What was that? I couldn't even move! It's like my entire body was numb!" He moves closer to him, eyes flashing. "Hey, hey, can you do that again? Please? That felt so cool!"

Hitoshi's entire brain short circuits as he tries to process the request. "Huh?"

"I couldn't feel a thing! That's your quirk, right?" Rabbit takes another step, and then he's right in front of Hitoshi, looking up at him with sparkly eyes. "I need you to do that again. Please."

This is getting dangerously close to *this is kinda fucked up* territory, and Hitoshi doesn't know if he likes it or not. *Never* has he had someone beg him to use his quirk on them. Hell, he's never had someone so much as *talk* to him after having experienced his quirk firsthand. They all usually avoid him or end up becoming one of his bullies, so what's so different now?

Rabbit is still talking, he realizes with a jolt. The vigilante is shooting off question after question, asking about his quirk and how it activates and what exactly it does and if it has any drawbacks—he even asks things that Hitoshi isn't sure he himself knows the answers to.

He stares at the most wanted vigilante in Japan, the vigilante who's currently standing a little over half a foot shorter than Hitoshi with his hoodie ears coming down to frame his face as he rambles, and the first thing Hitoshi thinks is *oh, cute.* Because he always knew Rabbit was small, but he never thought he was *this* small.

This boy in front of him is responsible for so many crimes and acts of treason, and yet Hitoshi is just sitting there, listening to him go into a rant about how mental quirks are underrated and deserve to be talked about just as much as flashy quirks are. He's going so fast that Hitoshi can barely keep up, so he settles on blankly staring at him.

Is this really the same Rabbit that saved him from that orphanage a

few years ago? That Rabbit was stoic and calm—seemingly uncomfortable without showing it, but *this* Rabbit is totally different.

Hitoshi doesn't remember him being this talkative, but then again he only caught a glimpse of him that day before he disappeared. He probably doesn't even remember him.

Hitoshi snaps out of his memories when he sees Rabbit grimace slightly, mid-sentence, and his eyes follow the other boy's hand as it travels down to grip at his stomach, and—

"What the *fuck,"* Hitoshi starts, pointing at the growing stain on the vigilante's hoodie. "You're *bleeding?"*

Rabbit looks down and then back up at him with a half-hearted shrug. "I do that sometimes."

That doesn't make Hitoshi feel better in the slightest. "Are—are you dying? Do you need me to call someone?"

By *someone* he means 911, because there's just *no way* that wound doesn't need medical attention. Has Rabbit been bleeding this entire time?

"Oh, I'm good!" The vigilante chirps, plopping down on the disgusting, dirty concrete. "But now that I'm here, I might as well take care of it. You can leave if you want, by the way."

Hitoshi doesn't budge, too shocked to really make a choice in such little time, but in the next second he finds himself wishing that he left right then, because now Rabbit is taking out a small box from the inside of his jacket and lifting up his shirt, exposing a nasty-looking slice on his stomach.

"What are you *doing?"* Hitoshi screeches, turning away from the sight of Rabbit pressing a dark cloth against the wound to stop it from bleeding. He then procures a needle and thread, and Hitoshi feels his heart drop to his stomach.

"I already answered that," Rabbit points out, deftly beginning to stitch up the cut. He does it with such ease that it's obvious this isn't his first time. "And please keep it down, they could be looking for me."

Who the fuck is *they,* Hitoshi wants to ask, but he stops himself at the last moment. This can't be real. This has to be a fever dream of some sort. Why is this happening to him, of all people?

Rabbit bites off the excess thread with his teeth and moves on to a deep, knife-shaped hole in his thigh.

“You really need to go to the hospital,” he breathes out, feeling queasy at the sight of so much blood. “That’s not... that’s not healthy. At all.”

“I’m sorry, is this *our* stab wound? Stay out of it, please.”

Christ, what is this boy made of?

Hitoshi pauses as he catches sight of a burn on Rabbit’s shoulder. The material of his costume has been scorched away, revealing raw, pink flesh beneath it. Yep, Hitoshi is going to throw up very soon.

“Is that from Endeavor?” He asks, trying to put himself back together and save some of his dignity. It’s no secret that the number two hero was sent after the vigilante following his latest public scandal.

Rabbit hums absentmindedly. “No, surprisingly, but I blame him anyway. AINA, flashlight please.” The device on his forearm lights up at the command, illuminating his work, but before Hitoshi can open up *that* can of beans the vigilante is speaking again. “It’s a wonder he doesn’t burn himself with the amount of flaming garbage that comes out of his mouth. I kind of want it to happen just once, y’know, so he knows how his victims feel.”

Hitoshi is slightly concerned by that comment.

“And he’s still so pale; you’d think he’d tan quickly with a quirk like that,” Rabbit mutters, finishing off one of his last stitches.

The line is so random that Hitoshi can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like in the boy’s mind. “It’d be hard for anyone to tan while living in All Might’s shadow.”

For a second, Hitoshi fears that he just said the wrong thing, but then Rabbit doubles over in laughter, the needle falling to the ground in his excitement. Hitoshi doesn’t even smile, though. *Was it that funny? I wasn’t even making a joke.*

By the time Rabbit comes back to himself, it seems he’s done with his stitching. Hitoshi is standing there awkwardly, still confused, when the boy struggles to his feet and immediately stumbles forward.

Hitoshi steadies him quickly with an outstretched arm, which is a surprise in itself. He wouldn’t have done that for anyone else.

“Thanks!” Rabbit’s hand lingers on Hitoshi’s arm, and the lilac-haired boy becomes stuck on the contact. “Hey, uh, don’t mention this to anyone?”

Oh, that’s right. He’s a wanted criminal. Hitoshi has just been in the presence of a wanted criminal for around five minutes.

“Sure. I don’t care enough.”

“Sweet!” He sounds like he’s smiling underneath the mask. “I hope I’ll see you around then.”

And then he leaves, a slight limp to his bouncy steps. As he watches him go, still dazed, Hitoshi can’t stop feeling the warm, comforting feeling that settles over skin. Rabbit is a vigilante, so he shouldn’t be trusted. And yet he saved Hitoshi once upon a time from a bad place. He’s done a lot of good for this world, so what’s really bad about him?

Hitoshi may not know the boy very well, but he does know that he’ll always feel like he owes him for what he did those few years back. He briefly wonders if Rabbit even remembers it, if he remembers Hitoshi himself—the young preteen, maybe around his own age, that stared at him with wide eyes as the orphanage was torn to the ground from the inside.

Rabbit exposed the foster system’s darkest secrets. Their abusive tendencies towards their wards were revealed to the public as well, which shut them down for good.

For that, Hitoshi will always owe him something.

The fact also remains that Rabbit *trusted* him. He knew about Hitoshi’s power and still talked to him, aware of what could’ve happened. Hitoshi could have easily used his quirk again and turned him in, and he didn’t.

Rabbit knew this and still stayed with him. He still *talked* with him.

Hitoshi doesn’t know if that makes him kind or just foolish.

Izuku feels so fucking stupid. He went out yesterday night and had to deal with private mercenaries coming after him, which made him forget the one goddamn thing he went out for besides his jobs: Missy's food.

So now he has a hungry cat at home waiting for him to come back with her expensive wet food. The wet food that doesn't taste half bad, in his own opinion.

The boy is paranoid as he strolls down the sidewalk. No one is following him this time, but that just makes him even more concerned. This feels like the calm before the storm.

His heart is still pumping from his conversation with that boy yesterday. He definitely wasn't expecting to run into one of his schoolmates—the same schoolmate that he got pissed at the day back after the USJ incident. He's a lot more... chill than he previously thought. He's definitely good friend material.

"Potential target located. Estimated time before contact: twenty-five seconds."

Izuku looks up from the floor and studies the older man walking his way. Hell, he doesn't even need AINA to tell him he's rich; the watch on his wrist and the nice phone he has pressed to his ear gives it away. He even walks like he's loaded.

He probably wouldn't blink an eye at a few missing bills in his pocket.

"Who is he?" He asks lowly, mouth barely moving. He keeps his head low, hands in his pockets as AINA identifies the businessman and explains his wealth. Yep. He's definitely someone who won't care about some stolen chump change.

Damn, Izuku is glad he recently added facial recognition as one of AINA's features. It's helpful in determining the best approach with his endeavors.

It happens quickly, as it always does. Rich Boy is busy on his phone arguing with whoever is on the other side of the line, which gives Izuku the perfect advantage. He pretends to stumble when he gets close, and their shoulders knock together roughly. Izuku's hand dips into the other's pocket with the excuse of trying to steady himself, and

he continues walking with a muttered *sorry* when the man barks at him to watch where he's going.

He doesn't speed up, as that's the biggest rule when borrowing: don't act suspicious. He fiddles with the wad of cash he managed to score, a wry grin slipping onto his face. It disappears a moment later, however.

A few months ago Izuku wouldn't have thought twice about stealing, but this time around he can't help but feel a little guilty. He doesn't *like* doing this, of course, but sometimes he has to. Besides, it's not like he's taking it from someone who really needs it, right? So why does he feel so bad?

It's more of an instinct now more than anything. He doesn't think he could stop even if he wanted to.

Izuku ends up buying Missy's cat food with some of the stolen money. This doesn't help ease the guilt weighing him down, though.

He glances at himself in one of the passing windows and loathes. In his dreams, he has already killed him, but the look on his reflection's face stays with him as he starts to walk the long route back to his building; a look like an accusation. Like a promise he's failed to keep.

He doesn't make it far.

It's chilly all of a sudden. There's danger in the air, but it's not nearly as bad as the feeling he got before the mercenaries attacked him.

"Hey, freak show!"

God. Fucking. Dammit. This again? He walks faster, clutching the box of cat food even tighter in his arms. He's never been much of a runner, but he's afraid that if he stops now he won't be able to keep himself from socking them in the face.

This isn't the same group of kids that picked on him the first time around. No, Izuku hasn't seen them or Tsubasa around for a while. He hates to admit that he's getting a little concerned.

"Come on, don't ignore us, Deku!"

His name is said in a sing-song voice, and the boy shivers despite himself. He's a vigilante, he's a hero-in-training, and he shouldn't be letting this get to him.

It's a miracle how they even recognize him after so long. Izuku can barely recognize them himself. They must be from elementary school.

The group of three boys and a girl catch up to him with ease and crowd him up against a wall. Izuku is silent throughout the whole ordeal, mind carefully blank. The cat food is snatched from his hands and thrown into the road. Words are hissed at him, all harsh indifference and crowing laughter.

“Useless.”

“Freak.”

“Stalker.”

His eye twitches at the last one, but he doesn’t say a word. He knows that one is partially true. His analyses do tend to freak people out.

“Oh, come on. Where’s your little bitch at? He's not here to help you now, is he?”

He’s jerked forward and shoved into the wall again. His nails dig into his palms, leaving behind pink little crescents. Don’t, a voice at the back of his mind says. It sounds soft, reassuring. Don’t act just yet.

It could be himself saying these words, or it could be something entirely different. All he knows is that he’s not really given a choice but to obey.

“Aw, look at him. Still can’t defend himself even after all these years. Pathetic.”

Izuku sighs. He is so, so tired and sore. His sloppy Walmart-grade stitches from before are being pulled taut with this shoving around. Izuku could fight back and run, but he’d just risk injuring himself further. He can’t do that. Not when the Sports Festival is in the morning.

He can't afford that right now either. His medical supplies are already dangerously low.

He feels like he’s floating right about now, his mind going back and forth between reality and fiction. He desperately wishes he could mimic the feeling he got when he was brainwashed. There was no pain, no more burning sensations from *Extract,* no more anything. He was blissfully unaware of the things happening around him.

It was the short reprieve he's been needing for a long time.

"Midoriya?"

Izuku doesn't flinch like the other teens do. He felt his teacher coming a while back due to his quirk.

It's kind of funny, though, Izuku thinks, that today is close to the day he first met Present Mic. Just short of a year ago with Izuku in the same situation. The only difference is that this time around Izuku is the one with the cat food.

The hero makes quick work of scaring the four students off, warning them about being out past curfew as he does so, and Izuku kind of wishes he'd be scolded for that as well so he can use it as an excuse to avoid the upcoming conversation. But alas, the world just likes making him the star of the circus, huh?

"I missed ya at the laundromat, kiddo, is everything alright?"

Izuku frowns as he feels the box of cat food being pressed back into his hands. Present Mic must've retrieved it from the road. "Oh, yeah, thank you!" He forgot that it's laundry day. "Didn't need to do it this week, so I just came out here to pick up some stuff. Sorry about that."

"Not a problem, listener!" The hero tilts his head, and the motion prompts Izuku to finally focus on him. He's in casual clothing, his hair pulled back into an intricate braid with small flowers pushed between the twists. It's a soft look, and Izuku knows it probably would've put him at ease any other time.

But this isn't any other time.

"Say, are you hungry by any chance?" His teacher seems to be studying him just as closely as Izuku is him. "There's a nice bakery one street over that's open all hours of the night!"

A bakery. With food.

Izuku doesn't remember agreeing, and yet he finds himself following Present Mic anyway, the voice hero whistling a tune all the way there.

Hizashi often strikes people as simple.

And in a way, he is. He's a DJ, a radio host, a teacher, and also a pro hero. This may seem like a lot, but it's really not when you consider the fact that he acts the same way in all of those settings. He always makes sure to act upbeat and only slightly annoying to everyone around him.

That's his persona. That's who he is. He likes music, he likes punching villains, and he likes screaming. That's about it. That's about as much as he *allows* people to see, at least.

So yeah, he's pretty simple. But where people go wrong is thinking that simple means the same thing as stupid.

If he's being honest with himself, running into Midoriya wasn't much of a coincidence. He waited at the laundromat for three hours for the boy to show, and each passing minute only increased his worry. Midoriya hasn't been acting right these past couple of weeks anyway, so sue him for doing a quick patrol around the places Shouta told him the boy frequents.

He just wants to make sure he's okay.

None of the teachers have missed the sluggish way Midoriya's been moving lately. He looks tired. The kind of tired that sleep can't fix, to be more specific. He looks like he's on the verge of passing out any second—as if one good breeze will have him falling on his ass.

He looks almost like Shouta did after the death of—

Hizashi stops that train of thought right there. It'll do no good to get worked up, not when he has a kid to subtly check over.

The first thing he notices is how thin he is. For all of his muscles, Midoriya is very small. Worryingly so. Hizashi frowns, glad that he convinced the little listener to come with him to eat something, even if it's small.

Shouta is waiting for him back at the apartment, his patrol having

finished up early on the other side of the city. One of the only times he doesn't have to stay up ‘til ungodly hours in the morning and Hizashi isn’t there. He knows his husband won't mind once he tells him the situation, however. And also if he gets him one of those blueberry muffins he loves.

The second thing he notices is that Midoriya’s favoring his left side. It's not exactly obvious—the boy hides it well—but Hizashi has been a hero for around fourteen years now. He doesn't miss the way Midoriya winces when he accidentally moves too quickly or strains himself. Shouta has complained a lot about Rabbit hiding injuries from him, so Hizashi thinks that it's not too far off to assume that's what’s happening here.

He can’t say anything about that, however. If Midoriya wanted to share that piece of information, he would’ve.

The bakery is quiet at this time of night. It may be open 24/7, but that doesn’t mean it’s always filled. That’s part of the reason Hizashi loves it so much; there’s less chance of him being recognized.

The hero got himself a banana chocolate chip muffin and Shouta a blueberry one. Midoriya ended up getting a vanilla cake pop—the cheapest thing on the menu, Hizashi noticed—and, at the voice hero’s insistence, a plain chocolate chip muffin.

It’s not a lot, but it’s something to start with. The fact that Midoriya has even humored him this far is astounding. He can see how out of it the kid is right now. At first, Hizashi thought it to be the work of drugs, but upon second glance he’s confident it’s just because of exhaustion.

This isn’t okay. Not only is this not healthy for the teen whatsoever, the Sports Festival is also tomorrow. The boy should be *resting.* How does he expect to compete in this state?

Hizashi needs to press, just a little bit, if he wants any hope of finding out what’s wrong. He doesn’t like being serious. Shouta usually handles that for him when he can, and yet he’s been finding himself in serious situations more often than not nowadays. He doesn’t know what to think of it.

“Can I ask ya something, listener?” he asks, his voice steadier than he feels. Midoriya looks up, a silent invitation, and Hizashi continues. ”You know that’s harassment, right? The bullying?”

Midoriya doesn't move, and he only utters out a quiet, "Not really," as he looks out the window, palm resting against his face. He hasn't touched his muffin yet. The cake pop doesn't really count—that only needed one bite to finish it. It's hardly enough to fill anyone up.

Hizashi tuts disapprovingly and the teen turns, his green eyes looking tired and resigned. It looks so wrong on his usually bright and bubbly face that Hizashi wonders if that was a lie, too, all this time. "You don't deserve that."

Midoriya hums, distracted, seeming to search the empty streets and roofs outside. He must be looking for something. Either that or he's keeping watch. "Doesn't stop it from happening," he says quietly.

And just *what* is he supposed to say to that? What the hell does that even *mean?*

Hizashi feels his heart jolt against his ribcage. His mouth moves before his mind can catch up. "Are you in trouble, Midoriya?"

With your father? He wants to add, stopping himself in the nick of time. Shouta has expressed his own concerns about the boy's home life more than once, but there really is no proof. It's all just speculation. Hizashi can't outright say it or else he'll risk pushing Midoriya away.

The boy blinks, eyebrows scrunching together. He hesitates for a moment before shaking his head. "I'm sorry I've been worrying you, sensei, but I'm completely fine! It's not like this stuff happens all the time. And besides, I know how to deal with it."

And, oh, Hizashi has *so many* things he wants to say about that last part, but unfortunately for him, his phone starts to ring. He internally curses himself for not silencing it earlier, and he barely even registers Nemuri's name on the caller ID before he declines it. He'll apologize to her later.

"Ah, I better head home now," Midoriya says suddenly, throwing a glance at the clock in the corner of the room. "It's getting a little late."

That's an understatement. It's nearly midnight.

His student gets up and thanks him again for the food. He bows stiffly at his teacher and makes for the door—and it's that motion that snaps Hizashi out of his thinking.

He stands up as well, grabbing his jacket and yanking it hastily over

his shoulders. “I’ll walk you home, kiddo! It’s dangerous out.”

Let me help you, is what he means to say.

“No!” The abruptness in Midoriya’s tone catches Hizashi off guard, and he watches the flush rise in his student’s cheeks. “Sorry. I just—I’ll be fine. No one is usually out at this hour, anyway. I don’t want you to waste your time.”

Hizashi makes sure to mask his desperation as he follows the boy out the door, out into the cool air. “You’re not wastin’ my time, listener! As a pro hero and as your teacher, it’s my job to make sure you’re safe, yeah?”

“And I really appreciate that,” Midoriya says, his bottle-green eyes beginning to shine in the light. “But I’m just a few blocks away. Please.”

Please. Hizashi’s mind screeches to a halt at the last word. *He’s begging me to leave it be.*

“Listener, are you sure you’ll be—?”

Midoriya’s hand shakes as he cuts him off. “I like walking alone, so please don’t follow me.”

Don’t follow me. It’s as much a plea as it is a suggestion. This boy is begging him. Why? Why is he doing this? And why is Hizashi just letting him *go*—

Midoriya glances back at him with a reassuring smile on his lips—but it’s fake, it’s all fake. There’s a panic deep in his eyes, so raw and unadulterated that Hizashi can barely hear over the ringing in his ears as Midoriya calls out a good night. He blinks, and then the boy’s gone. Just like that.

And the man listens. Even with his nerves screaming at him to fucking *go* and *see* and *save* his student from whatever monster is plaguing his living dreams, he doesn’t follow.

He thinks with a start that this is the feeling Shouta told him he got after confronting the boy that night.

Hizashi stares at the space Midoriya occupied, and he waits for something that’ll likely never come.

Chapter End Notes

he won't have to wait long

y

comfortable in chaos

Chapter Notes

> I just realized that we're 200k words in and we're just now getting to the sports festival

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For once in his life, Izuku isn't late, though it's a close thing.

His encounter with Present Mic last night left him shaky and unable to calm down, so sleep is now nothing more than a distant memory. He hasn't slept in how many days now? The fact that he isn't even sure speaks volumes.

He should probably make more of an effort to sleep considering you need to be well-rested if you want a stab wound to heal. Even so, he can't find it in himself to care too much about that. The bucket of chicken he's clutching to his chest is a really good motivator; he doesn't feel tired at all.

Now, this might be because he has ascended past the point of mere exhaustion, but the point still stands.

KFC is a life-savor.

"Oi, let me have some."

Izuku glares at his friend and bares his teeth. "You touch this fucking bucket and I'll snap your fingers."

Kacchan backs off with an eye roll, leaving Izuku to cradle his food protectively and hiss at the lingering students. *No one* touches his food without his direct permission and lives to see another day.

"Is everyone good and ready?" Iida shouts, standing in front of the door leading out of 1-A's prep room. "The event's about to begin!"

Oh, I'm good alright.

The students are all milling about, anxiety fresh in the air. Izuku isn't nervous, though. He *can't* be. He's going to be leaving tomorrow, and there's nothing anyone can do to stop him. He just hopes Kacchan will understand why he has to do this once he wakes up with Missy and all

of her belongings in his room.

This is the only way Izuku can protect everyone. If he leaves, All for One will focus on finding him—not on hurting his friends and the ones he cares for.

“Midoriya.”

Izuku whips around, about to throw hands with *whoever* has decided it’s a good idea to ask him for some chicken, only to stop short when his primal gaze meets mismatched eyes. He blinks, not liking the way he has to look *up* to stare his classmate in the face. “Todoroki! What’s wrong?”

Todoroki has never sought him out like this. In fact, Izuku hasn’t even heard him *speak* outside of answering questions in class or battle training. This is new.

“Objectively speaking,” the teen begins flatly, his eyes never leaving Izuku’s. “I’m stronger than you. More capable.”

Well shit. He’s right about the more capable part, but that doesn’t mean he should say it.

Izuku slowly reaches into his bucket and brings a chicken wing up to his mouth, patiently waiting for his classmate to continue as he bites into it. It tastes even better now that he’s doing it to annoy someone.

“All Might’s got his eye on you, doesn’t he? Now, I’m not about to pry into why that is,” his expression darkens, “but I will beat you.”

Izuku blinks. Once. Twice. He takes another slow bite and chews thoughtfully. “Oh.”

“Ooh! A declaration of war from the strongest in the class?” Kaminari teases, his words reminding Izuku that yes, Todoroki is saying this in front of the whole class. Lovely.

Kirishima seems to notice the tense air, as he steps forward to put a hand on Todoroki’s shoulder. “Hey, man, why pick a fight now? We’re about to go on—”

“I really don’t care,” Todoroki says coldly, shrugging off the touch. “I’m not pretending to be anyone’s friend here.”

The sentence makes Izuku pause, lips tugging downwards. The signs

have been there all this time, and yet Izuku hasn't paid them much mind in favor of getting through his own issues. *I'm sorry. I should've invited you over to our table that day when I had the chance. You probably wouldn't have accepted, but I know it would've stuck with you.*

Because despite the cold words and standoffish demeanor, Izuku can see straight through Todoroki. His classmate is just like him, and Izuku has a feeling he knows why.

He looks down, staring into his box of fried chicken. And then, after a moment of contemplation, he holds it out to the boy. Kacchan's glare is hot on his back, but Izuku ignores it. He's planning on giving him the rest of the food anyway as an apology, so there's no reason for him to be jealous.

Not that his friend will know what the apology is for until later.

Izuku keeps his arm outstretched, not caring that most of the boys (plus Mina and Uraraka) have come over to take a wing. Todoroki stays still, though, completely unfazed.

"You're clearly stronger," Izuku agrees, because it's true. He may have more quirks than the dual-haired boy, but it's not like he's going to use them. He doubts all of his quirks *together* can measure up to the force of fire and ice anyway. "I only barely measure up to the others in skill, objectively speaking."

The skill he *lets* them see. He can't exactly fight his classmates the same way he fights dangerous criminals. That would require a nice blade and bōstaff, two things Izuku doesn't have permission to have; one of which is banned on campus.

Nobody has to know he has another knife in his left shoe. It's just a precaution.

"Don't be so negative, Midoriya. There's no need to be like that!" Kirishima tries, sweat dropping.

Izuku is thankful that someone is coming to his defense, even if he doesn't deserve it. "Everyone else is aiming for the top," he says quietly, lilac hair flashing in his mind briefly. "Even the kids from the other courses. And I promise you, I'm not planning on falling behind."

One last try. One big finale. That's what this is going to be.

A crumpled copy of a smile flashes across his face. “I’m going for it too.”

Izuku doesn’t miss Kacchan’s suspicious look, and he doesn’t turn around to face him once he walks away either, as he knows that out of everyone on this planet, his friend is the one that’ll know something’s wrong. All he needs is one look to figure him out, and Izuku can’t let him have that.

Not yet. Not ever, probably.

And as they walk out of the prep room and down the hallway, ready to present themselves to the world and all the bloodthirsty media reporters, Izuku can’t help but think back to the conversation he had with All Might.

Izuku’s going to keep his promise. He’s going to tell the world *I am here.*

And maybe piss off one of the most feared villains of all time along the way. Leading someone on a worldwide wild goose chase sounds fun.

"It’s UA’s sports festival! The one time each year when our fledgling heroes compete in a ruthless grand battle!" Present Mic's cheerful voice calms the beginnings of panic in Izuku's chest. He must be the announcer for the festival. *"First up, you know who I’m talkin’ about. The miraculous rising stars who brushed off a villain attack with their steely willpower! The first years of the hero course! It’s Class A!"*

The resounding cheers in response make Izuku wince. There are a *ton* of people in the stands, a lot more than Izuku can ever remember being in UA's past sports festivals. They must be excited to see how the school is doing after the attack.

Iida holds his chin with a hand. “We’re expected to put on the best performance we can in front of so many spectators. I suppose this is merely one more necessary skill if we hope to become heroes."

Something that Izuku will probably never get used to. Good thing he won't have to worry about that for long.

Present Mic goes on to announce the other classes, ranging all the way from General Studies to the Business courses, and Izuku feels himself frown. *They’re just here to make us look good. It’s unfair that the school makes the kids who don’t even want to be here attend. This is still a show, I*

guess. They need good ratings.

Midnight cracks her whip from her place on the stage, and Izuku stuffs his face with another wing, barely paying attention. "Now for the athlete's oath!"

Someone from the back row of the students grumbles: "I still don't understand how an R-Rated hero is allowed to teach high school students."

Multiple people snort, and the aforementioned hero immediately gets frustrated. "Shut it! Your student representative is from Class A, Midoriya Izuku!"

Izuku hums absentmindedly, digging for one of the hidden biscuits, only to choke on air as he fully processes what his teacher had just said. *Huh?*

He stands there, dumbfounded, until Kacchan elbows him in the side and makes him stumble forward.

"Midoriya? Must be because he placed first in the entrance exam," Sero says.

A student from Class B cranes his head to get a glimpse of their representative. "He broke the record, right?"

Izuku chokes even harder, nearly dropping his bucket altogether as the cameras zero in on him, easily picking him out of the crowd and displaying him on the big screen. *What the fuck kind of bullshit is this! Aizawa didn't fucking tell me! Can I even say no?*

Iida herds him up a few steps before giving him one last push towards Midnight, who stands to the side to give him room.

Oh. He still has the bucket of chicken in his hands. He offers it to Midnight nervously, blank-faced, and nearly faints when his teacher doubles over in laughter. She just gestures to the microphone, and Izuku's eyes flick up to the screen. And *holy shit.* He looks like a trash gremlin. His eye bags are as dark as his humor, his hair a green *bush.* There's chicken grease on his lips and around his mouth, and he hastily wipes at it. Damn, so much for a representative, huh?

The crowd's cheering dies down for a moment as they take a good look at him, and he swears, he *swears* he hears a familiar female reporter in the distance say *it's him, lock up all the microphones* in

horror.

"Um." His voice cracks on its own accord, and he wishes the ground would just open up beneath him and swallow him whole. He doesn't have any confidence as Izuku on the best of days, and today isn't even *close* to being one of those. It doesn't look like he can back out now, though, so it's time to put on an act. He clears his throat and tries to at least look put together. He doesn't want to embarrass his teachers too much.

Speaking of which, Present Mic has been too quiet. Izuku wonders if he had to mute himself for some reason. Probably because he's laughing too hard.

"Kid." Midnight has finally stopped cackling and is now staring at him expectantly. "The oath."

"Oh, right!" One of the cameras zooms in on his bucket of chicken, and Izuku flushes. He hopes people don't think it's a sponsor. Actually, now that he's thinking about it, he kind of wants to be sponsored by them. He might get a lifetime supply of KFC out of it. He shakes himself out of his thoughts, suddenly hyperaware of the silence in the stadium. He feels like he's going to puke, and for once it won't be blood coming out. "Hi. How's, uh, how's everyone doing?"

"Just rockin', listener!"

That's the only reply he gets. Izuku is *this* close to naming Present Mic his favorite hero now instead of All Might. "That's good! So I—I know we all want to do our best today. This is a good opportunity for many of us, right? The past few weeks have been painful, but the only thing we can do is move forward now. The future needs us, not the past, y'know? So, uh, let's all give everything we have." He shifts on his feet, eyes glued to the ground. "Plus Ultra?"

He throws up a fist to mimic All Might's signature pose, only for his arm to accidentally jostle his bucket and cause it to tip, a wing falling with a moist *thump* onto the stage. The noise echoes faintly through the microphone, and Izuku gets the urge to *cha-cha real smooth* off a fucking cliff.

A few moments of silence, and then someone from the stands gives a loud *whoop!* Others hesitantly follow suit, and soon all that's heard is clapping and vaguely weirded-out cheering. Izuku shamefully picks up his fallen wing, practically running off the stage.

Kacchan is busy laughing like a madman, and Izuku throws the dirty wing at his cheek in retaliation because *it's not funny, dammit!*

"Deku! That was so good!" Uraraka bounces around him, eyes bright. "Very inspirational!"

His cheeks burn and he turns away, mumbling his thanks. There's no way that actually turned out good, right? She must be trying to make him feel better.

Midnight strikes a flirtatious pose. "Now! Without any delay, let's get the first event started. These are the qualifiers!" She brings out a remote from who knows where and points it at the big screen, an animated wheel lighting up. "It's in this stage that so many are sent home crying every year!"

She sounds way too excited about that.

"And the fateful event this year is this!" She clicks a button and the words *Obstacle Course Race* pop up in bold.

An ordinary race? Something easy to root out all of the outliers, Izuku thinks. Everyone has a pretty equal chance to show off personal skills this way, especially since they might be able to sabotage other students too. Damn. He'll have to set his chicken aside for this.

Izuku feels a small grin tug at his lips as Midnight explains the four-kilometer race. It's going to wrap around the outside of the stadium itself, and apparently anything is free game as long as you don't go off the course. Which is *perfect*. No limits as far as the eye can see.

"Racers, to your positions!"

A flash of light catches his attention as everyone moves. Izuku looks up and stares at the camera flying overhead in the form of a drone. The reminder that this is all being televised has him steeling his nerves. His father is most definitely going to be watching now, and he wants him to see *everything*.

"Start!"

The students are off like a rocket. Izuku's legs only burn slightly when he pushes off with *Boost*. He won't use One for All just yet; he's too sore from his fight with the mercenaries. He bandaged his torso and leg three times this morning in case his stitches decide to come loose during all this, so there's that. He should be fine if he takes it

relatively easy.

Even if every step feels like pins and needles.

The gate leading out of the stadium is narrow. This must be the first filter. Izuku stays behind the crowd of students, not wanting to get immediately pushed and shoved for not going fast enough. He has to get in front soon, however, or else he'll miss his chance. He clenches his teeth, knowing this is going to hurt, and jumps a couple of yards into the air, using one of the closest students as a trampoline as he shoots forward and bounces off the walls of the entrance. To others, it kind of looks like he's the ball in a pinball machine.

Todoroki has created an icy pathway to slow others down, so Izuku aims his landing to be on the far side of the track to avoid it.

"Eraser!" Present Mic shouts. *"Are you ready for our live coverage and commentary!"*

"Not voluntarily."

Izuku snorts, only for his attention to snap back into the game at the sound of Kacchan's explosions nearby. "I ain't letting you get ahead of me that easily, half-n-half!"

Hm. Kacchan and Todoroki. Those are going to be Izuku's two main rivals. That's who he needs to look out for. Iida is also on that list, and with a quick glance around Izuku spots him near the front of the large crowd. His quirk gives him a big advantage for this, so Izuku needs to think of something quick if he wants to be on the same level as—

A rush of air, and Izuku just manages to swerve out of the way in time as a robot pops up from the ground. Another one enters his vision up ahead, and he doesn't break stride as he twists in the air, sending it flying towards the group of students with a swift kick to the main body. That should slow them down at least a little.

But it seems that the more distance Izuku manages to cover, the more the robots start to appear. These ones are sleeker than the ones at the entrance exam were. They must be the extras that nobody destroyed. *They wouldn't have been able to salvage any from my battle center.*

Present Mic's voice follows the students easily. There must be speakers on the drones flying about. *"Every obstacle course needs obstacles! Starting with the first barrier: Robo Inferno!"*

As he fully rounds the corner, Izuku and the rest of the students are met with more than a dozen robots, except unlike the other ones, *these* robots are easily fifty feet high and much larger than the previous ones.

They look like zero-pointers.

Fuck. Izuku only fought one during the exam, and it took a lot out of him just to get up there and manually shut it down. How is he expected to fight multiple at once?

Todoroki is the first to react. He slams his foot to the ground and sends ice up the legs of a few of them, easily freezing them up enough for him to pass under them unscathed. Other students try to follow suit, but Izuku can already see the cracks forming on the thin layer of ice as the robots start to break apart.

They're going to collapse.

Izuku's arms fly up to protect his face as the machines start coming down, large chunks of them breaking off as they go.

"1-A's Todoroki bursting through and sabotaging the others in one move! This guy's cold!"

Hah. That's punny.

Once the dust and debris start to clear up, Izuku realizes just how far ahead the ice-user is. He needs to catch up now, and fast. He can either bulldoze through the remaining zero-pointers and injure himself more than he already is, or he can find another way. It seems he has no choice but to try and find openings. Fighting them all would only waste time.

Find the safest route, even if it's not the fastest. The smaller robots go for the legs, so stay low to the ground. They'll typically avoid face attacks so as not to grievously injure.

As Izuku darts in and out of the fray, taking down robots here and there, he spots Kacchan using his explosions to propel himself up and over the zero-pointers. A few of the other students are too, namely Tokoyami and Sero. They're trying to be quick as well. They must've realized how much of a waste fighting them would be.

Izuku could follow their example and climb up the building-size robots like he did the last time, but that'd take just as much time as

him fighting his way through. He might as well stay on the ground.

If only I wasn't fucking injured. I could use One for All to leap high above them otherwise. I would be up ahead with Kacchan and the rest of them.

Something catches his eye, and Izuku slows down just a little to yank a decent-sized slab of metal off the ground. It looks like the shoulder plate to one of the two-pointers. It'd make for a good shield in place of *Deflect.*

He grips the exposed wires hanging out the side and quickly ties it to his back. It's heavy, but it's not unbearable. He's carried more even without *Boost* there to help him.

"The current leaders of the pack are overwhelmingly from Class A!"

Gee. Where's the surprise.

A new voice comes from the speakers, and Izuku immediately perks up. Eraserhead doesn't speak often, so when he does, it has to be something important. Maybe something Izuku can use as a hint.

"They know there's no time to hesitate. They've been exposed to the outside world, up close and personal. They've had that fear planted in them." Oh. Unwanted memories plague Izuku's thoughts, and the boy pushes them away in favor of taking down another robot. *"They've endured it. Overcome it. They've grown from that experience and have forgotten how to hesitate."*

Because hesitating gets you killed. Izuku's known that from the very beginning, and yet he still hesitated back there. Back when his teacher was slammed into the concrete, back when his brother reached for his classmate's face.

Feeling slightly upset now, Izuku lets One for All hum through his veins the tiniest bit. He kicks the head clean off one of the robots, watching as the piece of metal flies into the air and captures the attention of the closest zero-pointer. The motion distracts it for just a moment, and Izuku dashes forward in a blur of red lightning. He breaks through the line of robots and out into the open air just as a loud boom echoes throughout the area.

"Piece of cake!" Yaoyorozu shouts, and Izuku laughs to himself. She made a fucking *cannon.*

Wicked.

“So the first barrier was a piece of cake? How about the second?” The voice hero is loving every second of this, Izuku is sure. *“Fall and you’re out! You gotta crawl if you wanna make it! This is the Canyon of Doom!”*

Izuku is running for the next obstacle before Present Mic even finishes. It’s just a series of giant tightropes pulled taut above a gaping ravine, that’s all. He’s run along wires thinner than this during his patrols. The boy is suddenly thankful he made Eraserhead teach him how to do exactly this.

“Focus on the balls of your feet. One after the after,” the hero demonstrates one last time for Izuku, who’s standing off to the side and watching the man run along an electrical wire. “If you let your heel slip to the side, it’s downhill from there. Just focus on the flow of it and you won’t lose balance.”

“And what if I do?” Izuku asks, grinning.

“You lose balance one more time and I can promise you won’t be getting any more smoothies from me.”

It’s safe to say that Izuku does not, in fact, lose his balance again that night.

He wouldn’t be running across these ropes with such ease right now if it weren’t for him, not that Izuku would ever admit it to the teacher’s face.

Tsuyu is the next of the students to go, and she hops along it just like a regular frog would, using her tongue to help pull herself along. The next to challenge the Canyon of Doom is a support course student decked out in a chaotic mashup of gear and tech. Izuku tries not to get distracted because *holy hell,* he really wants to talk to her now. She must've made all of that herself if she was allowed to bring them, and *is that a fucking jetpack?*

Izuku is jealous.

“Meanwhile! The leaders of the pack move on undaunted!”

That’s not a surprise either. All Todoroki had to do was use his ice to skate across, and Kacchan only had to use a few well-timed explosions to fly over it. Their quirks are versatile, and they both certainly know how to use them.

No one knows how many spots they’ll accept for the second round. It’s

always different every year depending on what the first round is. It can't be any less than forty, right? They still have two whole rounds to get through after this race.

"Our leader has reached the final barrier! That is to say—this minefield!" Present Mic cackles gleefully. "A quick glance is enough to reveal the mines' locations, so keep both eyes open and watch your step!"

Oh hell yeah. The course was lacking a little bit of spice.

Izuku needs to move quicker if he wants to keep his place. He's in the top ten, he's pretty sure. His basic enhancements are enough for him to keep up with the others, but at this rate he'll be overtaken in no time. His muscles burn as he pumps his legs faster, nearly finished with the second obstacle. He still has to practice more on his tightroping skills; he's not nearly as good or fast at it as Eraserhead is.

If I use One for All again this early I'll tire myself out. I'm already hurting from just this little bit of speed.

A minefield is interesting. It's something that not even Izuku could have expected from UA. This newest obstacle puts the leader at a disadvantage whilst also reeling in those views. It's flashy, but it's also smart.

He rounds the last corner, the last tightrope having been cleared, and he sees Kacchan blasting his way to Todoroki's side in the middle of the minefield. "Hah! This shit can't slow me down!"

I can hear him all the way from here. Present Mic has some competition.

Kacchan takes the lead, and Izuku is sure the media is loving this right now. They always love a good ol' turn around.

"The rest are catching up!" Present Mic reports dramatically. *"But with these two grappling for first, can they hold on to their lead?"*

Izuku narrows his eyes, watching everyone else brush past him and hobble onto the minefield. He stopped a little bit ago, right where the gates widen up at the beginning of the final obstacle. He can hop around using *Boost* and scan for safe spots at the same time, which is the safest option—one that will probably work. But the thing is it's going to hurt. The field is large, and it's still quite a long ways until the finish line. It will take him a while to complete it.

And if he uses One for All he would just be making his dilemma

obvious. Not only is the whole world watching, but his teachers are probably watching him, too. He's not dumb. They're searching for a slip up.

Besides. There's just a ton of bombs that haven't been stepped on yet, and it would be just a *waste* if they were left there to collect dust. Izuku fights back a near-feral grin and slides the robot's arm plate off his back. Anti-personnel mines should only be fourteen to fifteen centimeters down. He can just dig them up using the shield

This is probably his worst idea yet, which is why he's feeling absolutely giddy at the mere prospect of it.

This is gonna be so fucking funny on the big screen.

A few students pass him with wide eyed looks, and this time he can't hold back his smile. He takes a step back, admiring his handiwork, and quickly assesses the situation. He's lost his place now, but that's not a big deal. He'll gain it back really quick.

He holds the makeshift shield in front of his body and promptly bellyflops onto the pile of bombs he just dug up.

"Midoriya, what are you—?"

A large explosion is Jirou's answer, and then Izuku is flying through the air, screaming. The wind whips at his face and hair as he gains height and momentum, the slight heat from the bombs licking up his legs.

Taking a page from your book, Kacchan.

"A giant explosion from behind? What caused such a blast? An accident, or was it intentional?"

A drone flies alongside him, and Izuku sees his face briefly on the TV hanging on the outside of the stadium. He's suddenly taken back to that time he jumped out of a helicopter, when the cameras caught the moment Rabbit nearly died on the job. Not his finest moment for sure, but Izuku still looks back on it with extreme fondness. The only difference this time around is that Izuku isn't being tempted with death.

"And Class A's Midoriya rides the wave in hot pursuit—or something!"

Or something is right. Izuku still doesn't have a clue what's going on

here, he just kinda thought of an idea and rolled with it. But now it's working and the students down below are looking up at him in shock. His screaming has now turned into maniacal laughter, and he passes Todoroki and Kacchan with relative ease. And god, he *lives* for the look of surprise on their faces. That's the highlight of his day, hell, his *week*.

But his momentum is dying down, and he can tell he'll hit the ground soon. If that happens, the other two boys will just surpass him, and Izuku won't have a chance at passing them again unless he uses One for All.

There's the pop of explosions, and Izuku turns back to stare smugly at his two classmates. "Deku! Get the hell back here!"

Todoroki curses and uses his ice to speed himself up, not caring about how it'll help the others now.

"Our former leaders have called a ceasefire to chase down Midoriya! When a common enemy appears, people stop fighting!" A brief pause. *"Well, actually, they're still fighting, just not each other!"*

"What are you even saying?"

Izuku giggles once again at Aizawa's words, only for his mild amusement to disappear once he realizes his shield is moving away from him, leaving him flying forward by himself, completely vulnerable. *I'm stalling. I need to do something.*

He tightens his grip on the exposed wires of the slab of metal and tumbles forward in air, now facing the two pursuers. They're right there, just a breath away.

Don't let go. You're getting first place in at least one of these things or else it's all pointless. That's the point of this, right? To make a statement?

Izuku flips, holding the shield high over his head. There's a patch of bombs in front of them a few yards away. He can just see the churned dirt in his haze. It's going to blow up right in his pursuers' faces if he does this right.

Not my problem.

Izuku slams the shield down, right in between the other two, and then he's blasted forward yet again, the shield long forgotten as it gets thrown high in the air. He's sent soaring forward, this time at a much

quicker rate. He's not very high like last time, but he's in the lead, and that's all he wants.

"And Midoriya blows off the competition with no time to lose! Your class is something else, Eraserhead, what're you teaching those kids?"

The boy can't hear his teacher's reply in the midst of his sudden panic. He's hurtling through the tunnel toward the finish line, but he's heading straight for the ground as well. Fuck. He has no time to brace.

This is going to hurt.

He clenches his jaw as he hits the floor hard, his stitches pulling painfully at the impact. He rolls sloppily right out into the open, coming to a stop a few yards after the opening.

He lays there for a moment, trying to catch his breath, and feels the eyes of everyone in the stadium on him.

"The one who made it back to the stadium first is none other than Midoriya Izuku!"

The resulting claps and shouts make Izuku lift his head. They're cheering for him.

He's never been praised like this. Sure, as Rabbit he's always had the occasional civilian thank him for saving them or for getting their cat out of a tree, but this? All of this for plain old Izuku?

It's a change. He's not sure what he thinks about it.

Is All Might proud? The thought is traitorous, and Izuku hates how he finds himself instinctively searching the crowds for his mentor's face. *Did I do okay?*

He hasn't used One for All too much yet, even though he knows All Might probably wants him to. Is he upset over that?

A shadow passes over him, and Izuku blinks up at his friend, Kacchan's face one of irritation. "You made a mistake, Shitku."

Izuku lets a breathy chuckle escape him. "Did I?"

The blond rolls his eyes but yanks him up with a hand. Izuku grunts his thanks, and Kacchan fixes him with a predatory look. "I'm gonna destroy you."

“I’d like to see you try.”

Uraraka and Iida are the next to come up to him, both of them panting and sweaty.

“Deku! that was awesome!” Uraraka pumps a fist in the air, cheeks flushed. “First place, though! Man, I’m jealous!”

Izuku turns away, just as he did after the oath, rubbing the back of his neck. He’ll never get used to this attention. “Ah, it was really close!”

Too close, almost. Everything was pure luck. He honestly didn’t expect his strategies to work that well.

Iida goes on to talk about how he needs to improve with his quirk if he couldn’t even win a race with his speed, and Uraraka chimes in here and there. And sitting there, listening to both his friends happily converse, Izuku finds that he’s actually glad he ended up deciding to participate after all.

He wouldn’t miss this for the world.

“So it’s finally over,” Midnight starts, taking her spot back on the stage. “Let’s check the results!”

The very second Izuku sees Kacchan listed as number three and not number two, he cuts a glance over at the explosive teen, who glares right back at him. “Don’t fucking say it.”

Izuku mimes zipping up his lips, throwing the key away. He’ll just have to tease his friend about this later.

“The top 42 from this qualifying round will move on! Now, on to the second event! I already know what it is, of course.” The R-Rated hero smiles devilishly, winking at one of the reporters positioned off to the side. “Dying in suspense? Next up is a teen favorite: *paintball!”*

The words flash on the screen, and everyone blinks in unison, equally as confused. *Paintball?* Izuku thinks. *Like what me and Kacchan play at the mall sometimes?*

“Participants can, on their own, form teams of two to four members each, though you can choose to work alone if you wish! The rules are fundamentally the same as those of an ordinary paintball game—shoot at other players to disqualify them—but with one exception.” The board changes, listing the top forty-two students again. “Each of you

has been assigned a point value based on your ranking in the last event!"

"We'll earn points like in the entrance exam? Sounds simple," Satou begins.

Kaminari frowns. "Wait! If we choose to work in a team, will all our points be combined at the end?"

"I'm about to explain it, so just shut up already!" A crack of her whip has everyone quieting down. "Anyway, yes! Which is why it's important that you choose your members wisely. Your individual point values start at five, at the bottom! So the student who took 42nd place is worth five points, 41st is worth ten, get it? To get a student out, you need to hit them five times. This means that if your target is worth five points, each shot will be worth one. If they're worth ten, each shot is worth two, and so on!"

So if you get shot you lose a fraction of your points and give it to your attacker. There's no way to get your points back either, it seems. You only add to your team's total when you shoot someone—you won't be adding to your own individual value. You're stuck with what you have in the beginning.

There also isn't any bonus-life stuff either. You only have five tries, if you think about it.

That must've been Eraserhead's doing. There are no do-overs in real life, as he would say.

Midnight clicks a button on the remote, a quick list of the rules and objectives flashing on screen. "Now, *I* recommend forming teams. Not only is it good to have people watching your back, it's also good in the long run, too. If you get eliminated, there's a possibility you can still move on if your remaining team members score high enough to go through the next round! But if all members get out, your team is disqualified regardless of how many points you earned!"

Buckets are passed around filled with gear and equipment, and Izuku feels a bit of excitement course through him. Paintball is his favorite game. He's pretty good at it, too, but he's never been allowed to use his quirks inside the arenas he and Kacchan would use. This is something new to him.

He picks out a pair of red goggles and keens at the sight of a green-themed paintball gun. *Perfect.*

“Sounds easy, right? There’s a catch.” Midnight’s voice takes on a more sadistic edge. “Our first place participant won’t abide by our five-point scale. He is instead worth ten million points!”

Damn, that sucks. Izuku feels bad for that poor sou—*oh. That’s me. I’m the poor soul.*

The boy feels as if he suddenly got dunked in ice water. Everyone is looking at him hungrily, eager for a chance at redemption, and he smiles at them nervously.

Ten million? Are you joking? Fucking hell. You know what? Fuck this school. Izuku hates it.

This means that each hit on Izuku is worth two million points, enough to guarantee a team a spot on the leaderboard, most likely. It’s practically a test revolving around Midoriya himself—a test to see who the lucky ones to hit him are, because that part is inevitable. He’s going to be the main target for everyone. If he gets hit once, he can still keep his number one position with eight million points, but that won’t be good enough. He’d prefer it if he didn’t get hit at all. What he needs to do is take out the next greatest thing: Todoroki. He’ll have the second highest amount of points.

“The higher-ranked students are the ones to aim for. This survival game is a chance for a comeback. It’s *anyone’s* game!”

Yep, Izuku is definitely going to be targeted. He’s going to be in danger. This entire *thing* is dangerous. This round is going to be so fast-paced it’ll be sheer chaos.

“As you must have heard a countless times since enrolling at UA,” Midnight’s expression darkens, “this is Plus Ultra.”

Good thing Izuku has always felt more comfortable in chaos.

They’re given fifteen minutes to decide on their game plan, but to Izuku the time flies by quickly. He doesn’t know exactly how it

happens, but in the end he somehow ends up with a team of his own.

Most of the students avoided him like the plague near the beginning, and just when he was about to call it quits and go solo, Uraraka called out his name. She really is a god among mankind. A *savior.*

She has an amazing quirk as it is, and this situation will only exemplify that. The middle of the arena has opened up to reveal a large building of some sort, almost like a warehouse—a warehouse that gives Izuku not-so-fond memories, but a warehouse nonetheless. It's *large,* and its many rooms make for a realistic battle experience. Uraraka can use her quirk to make objects lying around float and distract the other teams into misfiring.

Hatsume Mei ended up seeking Izuku out personally, wanting to show off her *babies* to any potential heroes watching. Her inventions are even more spectacular up close, and Izuku was more than happy to team up with her if only to get a chance to use her jet pack at some point. He needs to ask her how she managed to make it without having access to dangerous parts. Perhaps Power Loader gave her them? If that's the case, would it be possible for Izuku to have access to their supplies for non-school related purposes?

Izuku was the one to seek out Tokoyami. Dark Shadow is almost like another being in itself, so technically their team has five members. The entity can make enemies think the team is somewhere where they aren't, and they'll mess up. Dark Shadow is also that powerhouse that the team so desperately needed, as Izuku doesn't think using One for All this round will be beneficial in the long run.

He just *knows* the third and final round will be brutal. If he even makes it that far.

"Formed your teams? Made your plans? Too bad if you haven't, 'cause here we go!" How the voice hero still manages to sound so upbeat is beyond Izuku. "*The countdown to this brutal battle royale!"*

They're all decked out in their gear, now, and if Izuku's being honest, everyone looks *badass.* He shifts his paintball gun from one hand to the next, getting familiar with the weight.

The paintball guns are lighter than real guns but heavier than guns that hold tranquilizers. It's a comfortable feeling. Familiar.

Now *this* is something he's good at.

“Start!”

The students are given a one minute grace period to actually make their way inside the building and find their own pathways. It’s kind of like a maze with the winding hallways every which way you go and the empty rooms off to the side with even more hallways branching off inside it. But, according to the schematics they were given, it all opens up into a large clearing in the middle.

The kill zone.

Altogether, Izuku’s team has 10,000,325 points. They’re automatically in first place by a landslide—it’s just keeping the points that’s the issue.

They rush inside, sticking to the outskirts of the building. It'll do them no good to head straight for the middle where a bloodbath will no doubt start soon.

“Remember the plan!” He says quietly, staring at each of his teammates in turn to make sure they understand. “We spread out for the first half of the game and focus on picking them off one by one! Just don’t let them see you.”

Izuku’s always been a fairly decent shot. He’s always a sniper when he plays this game with Kacchan. He’s got a good eye, apparently.

In Izuku’s opinion, however, he’s just good at *seeing* things.

They all split up in different directions, and he immediately heads up to the rafters. He needs a good view of everyone passing by. Staying on the ground will just make shooting him easier.

Fifteen seconds until the grace is over, a lone student jogs underneath him, unsuspecting. Izuku almost feels bad.

No one ever thinks to look up.

“You may now shoot, listeners!”

Five quick paintballs to the chest and the student is out for the count. Izuku doesn’t know how many points he just earned, as he didn’t pay attention to the screen on the student’s chest that shows how many lives and points they had left, but what he *does* know is that if he didn’t just get the first kill he’s going to be upset.

Izuku doesn't wait around to see the student's reaction, he's already off and running. The guns aren't exactly quiet; his position could've been revealed.

He grabs onto a nearby ladder and hoists himself up onto the highest level, and he crouches there for a while, just waiting. He can be very patient when he wants to be.

Extract is doing him a favor. He can *feel* them coming in his direction before he can even see them, so no one can really sneak up on him. Is this considered cheating? He isn't sure.

After two more kills Izuku decides he should start to head for the middle. He can already hear battles going on and quirks being used. It's nearing the halfway mark, so his teammates should be there soon.

This kill zone is exactly how it sounds: an area in the building where enemy fire comes at you from all sides. There looks to be five teams in the middle right now, all of them trying to block oncoming paintballs whilst also shooting out some of their own. It seems everyone had at least some common sense, as almost every team has some sort of member with a quirk good for shielding.

They haven't spotted him yet, as he's too high above them. He won't be able to get a good shot on any of them, though, not while they're moving around so quickly.

Izuku drops down onto a middle level, landing as quietly as he can—only to realize his dumb, *dumb* mistake a moment too late.

A large crate is thrown his way by Satou, and Izuku is forced to drop the rest of the way down to avoid being smacked in the face. He is so, so dumb. Jirou could *hear* him.

Tetsutetsu's team is coming straight for him now, same with Hagakure's. Izuku jumps behind a wall and shoots his classmate twice before trying to make his escape. He powers up One for All, willing to deal with the consequences of using it for his legs if it means he can jump out of here quickly, when something cold and wet takes over his feet.

He's—he's *sinking!* It must be because of someone from Tetsutetsu's team.

Shit, shit, shit, he's gotta get out of the kill zone! He fires off more warning shots in his attackers' directions, hoping to get them to back

off, only to hear the sound of jet propellers. He looks up just in time to see Uraraka drop from above and tap him on the shoulder, making him immediately start to float upward. She pulls him out of the sludge with the jetpack as added force while Hastume comes out of nowhere and distracts the other teams.

Izuku kicks free from the last bit of sludge, shivering involuntarily, and he ducks just in time to avoid a stray paintball.

“Jirou!”

Oh. So not so stray after all.

“On it!” Jirou replies to Hagakure, and Izuku curses as she extends her ear jacks to try and pull him back down for a better shot.

There’s a blur of black, and Dark Shadow flies forward to smack the earphones away. It would be more funny to Izuku had he not just escaped metaphorical doom.

Uraraka flies him up quickly to a nearby safety spot, Hatsume and Tokoyami warding off paintballs the entire way. They all drop down to catch their breath, and Tokoyami nods approving at his quirk. “Well done, Dark Shadow. Be sure to cover our blind spots.”

“Gotcha,” the creature replies

Izuku is suddenly struck with a newfound appreciation for his classmate. He’s just the defense the team needed.

“Well, barely five minutes have passed, but the battlefield’s already crazy! With everyone scrambling for points, it’s not just the ten million out there! Those other high tankers are worth a shot as well.”

Yes. If Present Mic keeps pushing everyone toward the other high-ranking students, it’ll give Izuku and the team an opening. This is more like a one-sided massacre, after all. Everyone in the killzone was aiming at them. They need some form of reprieve.

They do not, however, get that reprieve, as in the next second Shoji is being thrown onto their level by Tsuyu’s tongue, and Izuku chokes upon seeing the multiple guns Shoji holds in his *multiple* hands. *Is that even legal?*

He must’ve snagged them from other fallen students.

Extract hums lowly in his mind, and Izuku leaps onto a neighboring platform just in time as Tsuyu's tongue reaches for his weapon. No, *Tsuyu* must've snagged the guns from *existing* players. Izuku shoots, but she latches onto a guardrail and hauls herself back. She fires her own shots, but instead of hitting Izuku, it goes right past his shoulder and hits Uraraka instead. *Fucking hell.*

"Good job dodging, Midoriya!" Tsuyu croaks.

Izuku doesn't get a chance to reply to her as he suddenly *feels* them. His heart leaps in his throat. "Scatter!"

Kacchan and Todoroki are charging for him at the *same time.* Kacchan blasts at him, a dark cloud of smoke obscuring Izuku's vision. A paintball cuts through the haze and hits him in the shoulder, another going right past his ear. The slight pain spurs him into action, and he fires his own shots into the smoke blindly before taking off running—only for ice to encase his feet and freeze him in place.

Oh. Oh, no.

Izuku can feel Todoroki behind him, and his team isn't that far off. He twists, being forced to watch with wide eyes as his classmate aims his gun and pulls the trigger. On instinct, Izuku's arms come up in a cross, and he's just about to use *Deflect* when he realizes just what the *hell* he's doing.

Two paintballs hit him, one after the other, until he calls upon One for All and smashes the ice into smithereens, freeing himself. Izuku dashes away, red lightning biting at his skin. He's not quite quick enough, though, as another paintball comes flying from the other side of the building and hits him right in the cheek. He forces himself not to break stride and keeps going until he finds himself in an empty closet space. He shuts the door and allows himself a moment to just breathe.

Who got that last shot in? He—he has to find out. Because now he's down to only two million points, putting his team at somewhere around fourth or fifth place depending on who exactly shot him those four times. He can't be sure yet.

His group scattered like he told them to, though that might not have been the best idea, given by the quick loss of their points. *Of course they'd both come after me at the same time.*

The boy clutches his side, sudden panic hitting him at the thought that *oh fuck, I might've torn something!* But after a quick check he realizes

his stitches haven't come undone yet, though they're loosening, and he can feel the needles of pain coming back. His medicine must be wearing off.

Izuku shakes his head at his own stupidity and lays there for a moment, just listening. He's in a quiet space, so no one can see or hear him, but *he* can see and hear them.

Someone is attacking Kacchan's team. His friend must've been taken off guard while fighting off Jirou and Hagakure's shared team.

"Too simple, really," Izuku hears.

And is that—? Oh. That's the boy from before. The one that Izuku wholeheartedly *despises.* The one who, now that Izuku can get a good look at the screen on his chest, must have gotten that last shot in. That's the only way he could have more than 2,000,000 points.

The blond says more stuff to taunt Kacchan, but Izuku doesn't allow himself to pay attention just yet. He's fingering the trigger on his gun as he forces himself up. He has the perfect angle here, hidden in this little room with little peepholes all around it. He can shoot the blond —Monoma, his friends called him, and eliminate him. His teammates are nowhere to be seen.

When Izuku *does* let himself pay attention, he regrets it immediately.

"Did you really need to shoot for first place? You're already a celebrity, aren't you?" Monoma's mere voice grates on Izuku's ears. "The victim of that sludge incident! I'll have to ask you sometime. How does it feel to get attacked by villains on an annual basis?"

And there it is again. Those words.

Celebrity. Sludge villain. Attack.

Izuku feels something dark enter his bloodstream, and the grip on his gun tightens. His eyes flicker to Kacchan, who seems to have snapped as well.

No one talks to my friend like that and gets away with it you fucking coward.

But just as Monoma shifts that centimeter over, just as Izuku is about to pelt him with a whole lot more than five paintballs, Present Mic's voice rings out in the large warehouse and Monoma disappears from

his vision.

“Both the doggedly pursued first place team and its determined pursuers from Class A are nothing to sneeze at! Let’s take a look at the current spread. How are our teams doing after seven minutes of play?”

A hologram pops up in the middle of the small space Izuku is hiding in, so it seems that Nezu must be watching him as well.

A brief, shocked pause before Present Mic speaks again. *“Oh? Now wait just a second! Team Midoriya has lost their place as number one and have dropped down to number four! What’s going on?”*

Todoroki’s team is first, as they shot Izuku twice to get an extra four million points, followed by Bakugou and Monoma. The latter is only third right now by the skin of his teeth.

That’s not right. Izuku is decidedly going to *kill* him.

It’s all too clear what happened during the first round. Class B threw the qualifiers and planned for the long game. Even before now, Izuku has had the impression they’re stronger than they show, but this is a whole new level. They want to end Class A’s supremacy by completely *humiliating* them.

By the time the game is more than half over, Izuku has found his way into very large vents. He’s been planning on staying in there and sniping the occasional fool that happened to go under him, but then, right at the last three minutes mark, the hatch beneath him gives way and drops him right in the middle of room he does *not* want to be in.

The air turns cold behind him. *Extract* warned him a while ago that they were here, but to be fair Izuku didn’t expect to get dropped from the vents.

Fucking Nezu. Fuck off you funky stoat.

Izuku turns around to face his classmate, who has his gun hanging limply at his side, and nods in greeting. “Todoroki.”

“Midoriya,” is all the warning he gets before the ambush happens. But this time, Izuku is ready for it.

The two shots that come his way from behind are easily dodged, and Izuku picks up a heavy crate sitting nearby and kicks it at them. The wood splinters and makes the weights inside of it go flying.

Yaoyorozu and Iida are pushed back, but Kaminari doesn't waste time and immediately sends out a wave of electricity, shocking Izuku. He breaks it off too early, however, as if he's afraid of hurting Izuku too much, and the green-haired boy uses this worry to his advantage. He shoots forward in a blur of red, quickly snatching the guns from both Yaoyorozu and Kaminari before either of them can react, and snaps them in half with a grunt.

The entire team is holding back, that much is for sure.

They're trying to protect Todoroki while also trying not to harm him. This leaves him more exposed than he would've been, which makes it easy for Izuku to see his chance. Todoroki can't use much of his ice without hurting Iida or his other teammates either, so he's left standing off to the side while the others try and detain Izuku.

Yeah. That's not going to slide.

Izuku jumps on the wall and soars sideways through the air, skillfully ignoring the throbbing heat in his stomach, and he aims.

Bingo.

Todoroki's eyes widen. The paintball heads right for him, and Izuku knows right from that look that his classmate is on his last shot. He doesn't even have to look at his screen to know. Todoroki will get eliminated if this one hits, and if he gets eliminated, his teammates will be on the chopping block. They'll get picked off until there's no one left, and then the four million they got earlier will be worth nothing.

Ice is a no-go. For him to make an ice barrier thick enough to stop the paintball at this close of a range, he'd have to risk harming one of his teammates. Todoroki won't do that, Izuku is sure. He may not always be a team player, but he's not stupid.

And so, for the first time, Izuku sees a spark of flame erupt from the boy's left side. It happens quick; a flash of orange and yellow in front of him, and then the shell of the paintball melts as it makes contact with the wall of fury and heat before it can even touch the boy.

It's beautiful, in a way, if not entirely dangerous.

But that beautiful fire also means Izuku can't touch or shoot Todoroki anymore, so he has no choice but to retreat. Iida tries to rush him, seemingly not wanting to use his own paintball gun, but Izuku pushes

himself faster, cold lightning licking at his flesh.

One more shot and Izuku is out, too. He can't get hit anymore or he'll screw everything up.

When he meets back up with his teammates near the middle of the building, hiding up in the rafters, he can barely look them in the eye. "Sorry guys, they trapped me. It was like an ambush."

A well-coordinated ambush at that.

But the other students don't seem to mind. They're still in fourth, after all, so they're most likely going to head to the next round. Uraraka and Hatsume ended up getting a lot of people out with their combined efforts, and so did Tokoyami with Dark Shadow as his *blanket of darkness.*

The middle down below is nothing short of a war zone. People are using their quirks to trip others up and defend their own remaining points. Paintballs of all different colors are flying, and some people have taken to just throwing the actual guns at their targets to distract them while a teammate with better aim shoots at them. It's a *bloodbath,* and many are heading for the exit as they get eliminated in the blink of an eye. There's not many left at this point.

"One minute left, listeners!"

Bakugou and a few other teams are duking it out, just trading hits and not doing much damage to the other. The sounds of explosions take the precedence over every other sound. Todoroki is nowhere to be seen.

Less than thirty seconds left. He's okay. He could hide here, he could hide and stay at fourth place. But it's not enough.

It'll never be enough for Izuku.

He calms his breathing. There's a multitude of quirks all around him, and it's slightly overwhelming. He's been holding back *Extract,* trying to push it away because of how annoying it is in his head, but now he needs it.

For the first time in a very long time, Izuku calls upon *Extract* willingly, and he searches.

It doesn't take long to find him. He can feel him, hiding behind his

own large obstacle on the ground level. He was planning on waiting it out, too. Yeah, Izuku isn't going to let that happen. He doesn't deserve to get away with being in third.

Monoma has been plaguing Izuku's thoughts since the first day back after the USJ. In some ways he reminds Izuku of Kacchan, in some ways not. Kacchan has conviction in his eyes and the strength to rise up to a challenge whenever faced with one. Monoma is like a wasp, one that stings and stings and stings without a reason, if only to quiet his own insecurities.

Izuku finds it hard to truly be afraid of Kacchan, at least not anymore. His words hurt sometimes, but that kind of pain is a temporary thing. He knows that his friend cares, even if he doesn't show it. Those words don't leave scars like Monoma's does. Because sometimes, Izuku can't help but feel that Monoma is right.

Their class is special now. Bonded together through a traumatic experience. Some of them only came upon their spot in 1-A because of sheer luck, including Izuku. He can see where Monoma is coming from, and he knows that it's just the boy's strategy to mess with people's emotions, but he can't help but feed into that anger he's feeling inside him.

And now he's been given the chance to act on that anger without any real repercussions. It's almost too good to be true.

He won't lose to Monoma. He can't. He'll take him out personally just to spite him and make sure he knows that 1-A is worthy of their titles as heroes in training. They're not just a bunch of cocky assholes.

He'll show him.

He steps out of his hiding spot, ignoring his teammate's frantic calls behind him. He steps onto the ledge, and far down below he hears one of the students ask their teammate *why do I hear Megalovania?*

He knows he's being petty, but that word might as well be his middle name. He locks onto the copy cat *Extract* is so very fond of, and right then it's almost like a switch has been flipped. Everything around him becomes clearer, as if in high definition. His chest feels tight, and he feels as if he breathes he might just release that pressure inside him and let the coil spring loose. The faintest bit of red seeps into his eyes, and the boy grips the gun a bit tighter.

A vengeful Izuku is a scary thing.

He steps off the platform and drops headfirst into the middle of the war, a sharp smile on his face as he shifts the gun just a little and pulls the trigger.

Found you.

He catches Monoma's gaze halfway across the battleground and sees the look of realization on his face as the boy remembers he's the last of his team. A new wave of paintballs come toward Izuku, everyone eager to be the one to get the remaining two million.

Izuku's own five paintballs hit Monoma in the center of his forehead with deadly precision, one right after the after, and the force is enough to have the blond stumbling back.

And maybe Izuku will pay for that later, as no teenager should have that level of accuracy with a gun, but he can't do anything about it now.

The buzzer sounds, and then the balls that were aimed at Izuku collide with him all at once. He bites back a cry at the onslaught. Some of them hit his leg and back, but others hit his stomach, right near his *wound—*

For a moment there, he nearly blacks out from the sharp wave of pain that overtakes his body as he hits the ground, and when he comes to, Uraraka is the first face he sees. She helps him to his feet using her quirk. "Deku, we did it! We got third place! And that move you just did was *so cool* and—hey, are you okay?"

Izuku laughs nervously as they walk their way out of the warehouse, his hand trying to discreetly cover his stomach. He can barely even walk straight. This can't be happening to him right now. "I'm just fine! I'm happy we made it to the finals!"

It's a good thing Present Mic is quick with the results, as Izuku needs to leave *right now.*

"Team Todoroki got first place, Team Bakugou got second, and Team Monoma got—oh? What happened there? What a turn of events, listeners! In third place we have Team Midoriya, and for fourth place Team Shinsou comes out of nowhere with the unexpected elimination of Monoma!"

The rankings aren't even all the way out of the voice hero's mouth before Izuku starts to speed walk to the bathroom, waving off the concerns of Uraraka and Iida. His stitches have definitely loosened,

and he can feel something vaguely wet coating the insides of his bandages. Damn it all, he has to fix this before it becomes obvious. There's an hour break before the final test, so he's got time.

By the time Izuku makes it into a stall inside the stadium, he's already out of breath. *Fuck.*

He shouldn't have gone after Monoma like that. Why did he do that? It was a stupid idea, really. Childish, too. Does he always have to fuck things up in his life like this?

Izuku rolls his ring up and down his finger out of habit, needing something to do with his free hand as he lifts up his shirt to inspect the damage. He feels like he's going to throw up, and his head is pounding. There's no way his wounds are getting infected, is there? He cleaned them up that night, albeit quickly, so he should be fine.

He should be *better* than fine. He's been through worse. He doesn't know why this has to happen now of *all* times. Literally any other time would've been ideal.

He's royally screwed, isn't he? He fucked up. Izuku fixes up the stitches as best he can without proper materials and presses toilet paper over the wound to wipe up the small dribbles of blood that escaped the incisions. He places the sticky bandages back on top, over the added layer toilet paper, his jaw starting to hurt with how hard he's clenching it.

There's no alcohol to numb the pain this time.

It only takes him another few minutes to finish up, and thanks to *Extract,* Izuku is only half surprised when he comes out of the bathroom and finds Todoroki waiting for him at the mouth of the hallway, face partially shadowed.

He says his name in that low way of his, and to be frank, Izuku could just walk away. His classmate can't exactly make him stay. He could just walk right past him and ignore the other boy so he can deal with his own problems, but he doesn't.

Izuku stops, and he listens.

Chapter End Notes

intense.

1

cycle of hatred

Chapter Notes

(warning: implied/referenced child abuse)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Todoroki Shouto is something of a conundrum.

The son of the number two hero is cold, indifferent, yet determined in everything he does. Every move seems to have a reason behind it, every look comprised of a plethora of emotions that are so tightly contained that not even Izuku can identify them all.

But upon closer inspection, with Todoroki leaning against the wall just a few yards away from him with this *look* in his eye, Izuku thinks that that's not quite right. His emotions aren't *contained,* they're suppressed. As if he doesn't understand how he's supposed to deal with them, so he just sweeps them under the rug and covers them up with a sort of angry facade that pushes everyone away.

It's familiar, but only at first glance. Kacchan's intimidation is different: it's a fiery heat, a string of curse words and insults, and it's not always honest. Kacchan doesn't always mean the words he says; it's more of a barrier, a better, legal way to express himself since homicide is frowned upon.

Todoroki's intimidation, however, is colder. It's ironic considering *Todoroki* should be the one with the fiery spirit, but now Izuku's starting to think he's finally beginning to understand why he is the way he is—it's because he simply doesn't know how else to exist. He doesn't *know* how to be soft.

All he knows is heat and scorching fire, brutal fists and angry expressions. So perhaps the cold is where he finds himself more at home.

Which leads to the problem at hand.

Izuku slows to a stop and stares at the boy. His classmate is standing half in the shade, his right side shadowed and his left side illuminated in a golden glow, bringing attention to the nasty burn right over his eye.

I wonder if it still hurts you after all those years.

Izuku's own scars itch at the thought.

"You want to talk?" He asks, trying to sound neutral. The last thing he needs is to piss his classmate off. "The dining hall will be packed if we don't hurry."

Not that he cares much about that. He just wants to get back to his bucket of chicken. And maybe look up some more cat videos for motivation while he's at it.

Todoroki is still standing there. Glaring. Izuku holds his gaze without blinking, genuinely concerned. *I bet he wins most staring contests.*

It doesn't take much longer for the boy to speak: "You surprised me. So much so that I broke my own pledge."

Oh. So this is about what happened during paintball. Izuku doesn't think he likes where this conversation is going anymore. A small part of him had hoped this wouldn't be another confrontation.

It would've been to Todoroki's advantage to use his left side during the entirety of the second round, and yet he didn't use it until he deemed it necessary.

"Iida, Kaminari, Yaoyorozu." He brings his hand out of his pocket and studies it as he speaks. "None of them felt it. In that last instant, I was the only one feeling that pressure."

The only pressure Izuku remembers feeling in that situation was the pressure of KFC's possible lawsuit hanging over his head, but he doesn't voice this thought aloud.

Todoroki looks back up. "You didn't use your power, and I still felt that shift. It reminded me of someone."

"Oh?" Izuku tries to mask the sudden panic that stabs at his gut. There's no way his classmate knows about his fath—

"Are you All Might's secret love child or something?"

And—wait, *what?*

It's Izuku's turn to stare, blank-faced and confused as he processes the question. Is he *who's* secret *what?*

Todoroki just blinks at him, as serious as ever, and Izuku can't help it, he laughs. He doubles over, one hand on his knee and the other clutching his stomach. The movement has pain racing up his spine, but he can't bring himself to stop. The fact that one of his classmates is asking him if he's *All Might's* son, out of all the heroes out there, speaks volumes on All for One's *parenting.*

Oh my god, he'd be so pissed if he heard this! Yes!

"Yes?" Todoroki echoes, making Izuku sober up instantly.

"Wait, no! That's not it." Izuku flushes suddenly, the meaning of the words finally settling in. "I didn't mean to say that aloud."

A moment of pause, and then: "Ah, I see. You're supposed to keep your relationship a secret."

"What?"

"I knew there was something you were hiding."

"Hold on—!"

He cuts off Izuku's attempt at fixing the mistake, eyes narrowing. "You know, my father is Endeavor. The second strongest hero. And since you're related to the number one, I have all the more reason to crush you."

If Izuku is being honest, that last part doesn't sound so bad. Todoroki has a jawline so sharp you could probably cut bricks with it.

"Yeah, he's gone all out to make a name for himself as a hero, but he's always seen the living legend as a roadblock and an eyesore." The boy looks to the side, seemingly annoyed at the mere mention of his father and All Might. "My father could never beat him on his own, so he came up with another plan."

Izuku speaks before he can stop himself, memories of the files he got a glimpse of in the number two hero's safe that day coming back to him. "A quirk marriage?"

Todoroki's eyes narrow, looking surprised and slightly suspicious. "Yes. With his wealth and fame, my father made my mother's family agree to the marriage. All to get his hands on her quirk." His words darken. "I'm nothing more than a tool for that human garbage. He raised me as a hero just to fulfill his own ambitions."

And in a sick, twisted way, it makes sense. Endeavor has very powerful flames, and he's susceptible to overheating if he uses too much of it at a time. With the added power of ice, that weakness would be nearly nonexistent for a fire quirk. It's a good balance.

"As I remember it, Mom was always crying. She told me she couldn't stand to see my left side right before she threw scalding water on my face."

Is that why she's in a hospital? Because your father blamed her and put her there to make things easier for himself?

"In short, not using my left side against you was my revenge on him. By never using my rotten father's quirk—no, by rising to the top *without* it, I'll have denied him everything."

And isn't that familiar? *Extract* twitches, as if sensing Izuku's thoughts, and the boy clenches his teeth to fight back the irritation bubbling up inside him. Not at Todoroki, never at Todoroki; at the world.

Same situation, different quirk. It makes Izuku's blood boil.

His classmate stuffs his hand back in his pocket and turns away. "You don't have to worry about me revealing your secret. Either way, I'll rise above you with just my right side. Sorry for wasting your time."

"You didn't waste it," Izuku mumbles, but the boy doesn't stop walking.

He watches him go, mind racing. There's nothing for Izuku to say, so he stays quiet.

He's doing this to make a point. It's petty, but not to him. That kind of thinking is what gets you killed. He frowns. *But am I one to talk? Am I being a hypocrite?*

Whatever. Izuku can't do much about it now. The break is an hour long, so he has plenty of time to annoy people and cause chaos.

He heads for the lunchroom, glaring at Kacchan once he rounds the corner. "You know, you didn't have to stalk us like that. It's weird."

"Your stupid notebooks are worse," Kacchan counters, falling into step beside him. "And maybe I should tell All Might congratulations. It's a boy."

Izuku turns an unimpressed look on him, cheeks burning. “Really. That’s what you got out of that conversation?”

“Yep, and I’m never letting you forget it. ‘Sides, he’s better than your real one, isn’t he?”

Izuku trips him and flees.

Lunch ends much quicker than Izuku would’ve liked.

“Before we get to the final event, I’ve got good news for all those out of the running!” Present Mic announces. *“This is still a sports festival, so we’ve prepared a recreational activity for all participants! We even shipped in cheerleaders from America to get you pumped up! Once that’s over, we’re on to the final event.”*

Izuku wipes his greasy hands on Kacchan’s shirt, cackling at the kick he gets in reply.

“Between the sixteen members of the four winning teams, we’ll have a formal tournament! A series of one-on-one battles!”

Oh. Oh fuck yeah.

Kirishima seems to brighten up as well. “A tournament, huh? So we’ll be up in that ring I see on TV every year!”

“Was it a tournament last year, too?” Ashido asks, and Sero nods in reply.

“The format’s always different, but most involve some kind of head-to-head competition.”

Last year was sword fighting. Izuku thinks that that one was the most entertaining of all the years.

“The matchups will be decided by drawing lots. Once that’s settled, we’ll move on to the festivities and then the tournament itself!”

Midnight explains, flashing another signature smile at the cameras. "It's up to each of you sixteen finalists whether or not you participate in the fun. I expect some of you would rather take a breather and save your strength. Now, let's start with the first-place team."

Before the hero can continue, however, Ojiro steps forward. "Um, excuse me. I'd like to drop out."

Izuku raises a brow as the boy continues on despite the protests of his classmates and the crowds.

"The paintball battle," he begins, his face looking like he tasted something sour. "I have no memories of anything that happened up until the tail end. It's probably *his* quirk that did it."

He gestures with his tail, and Izuku's eyes slide over to the boy in question. Lilac hair. Tired features. Yes, that's who Ojiro teamed up with, isn't it?

He can brainwash people. *He did it to me before, but I still have memories of it and how I felt during it.* Does he have multiple aspects to his quirk, or is Izuku a special case?

Perhaps it's different for everyone. He'll have to look more into that in the future.

By the time his brain is done spewing ideas, Ojiro and a boy from Class B have both asked to drop out, both for the same reason.

"These guys! So manly!" Kirishima says, close to tears.

"We have a strange turn of events," Present Mic says, sounding giddy at the drama. *"What will the coordinator decide?"*

Midnight tilts her head up, studying the boys through sharp eyes. "How naïve and green." A pause, and then she cracks her whip with a predatory smile. "I *like* it!"

Izuku snorts, unsurprised.

"Shouda and Ojiro have officially withdrawn! Now, for the replacements..."

In the end, Tetsutetsu and Shiozaki replace them, which makes everything all the more interesting. Tetsutetsu is exactly like Kirishima, though instead of just hardening up his skin, he can turn

into steel.

“And here are the matchups!”

When Izuku gets a good look at the board and sees who’s fighting who, he can’t help but let out a disappointed breath.

Fuck. If he wins his first match his second is going to be against Todoroki. But before that...

“Midoriya Izuku. That’s you, yeah?”

Izuku’s eyes widen when he turns to face the much taller boy behind him. Curse his damned height. Everyone always seems to make Izuku feel like a child. That must be a shared quirk, he thinks.

He can see the boy better now in the light. The alleyway was dark that night, but Izuku still recognizes him. The eyes are what catches his attention first. They’re the same as they were when Izuku first saw him after class that day: tired, half-lidded, done-with-everything eyes with orchid hues that Izuku can stare at forever and not get tired of.

Shinsou Hitoshi. A name to match the face. Izuku likes it.

He opens his mouth, a joke on the tip of his tongue, but then *Extract* ripples in his mind like a wave in the ocean, and Ojiro is placing his tail over Izuku’s face from behind. “That guy. Don’t answer him.”

Shinsou just smiles and strolls away. Izuku is slightly disappointed.

And when Ojiro pulls him aside and explains everything, Izuku thinks he’s starting to understand the purple-haired boy just that much more.

They’re given a short reprieve before the tournament.

Some prefer to psych themselves up while others try to relax. Everyone is dealing with it differently, Izuku realizes, and before he knows it, the time comes.

“Thanks, Cementoss!” Present Mic says to his workmate, marveling at the new arena that had been made. *“Hey, guys! Are you ready?”*

Only the crowd responds, the students opting to stay quiet out of nerves.

“You’ve been through hell to get here! But now it’s time for the one-on-one tournament! You’ve only got yourself to rely on! Even if you’re not a hero, this saying holds true! You know it! Spirit, technique, strength, wisdom, and knowledge. Use ‘em all and show us your best!”

Okay. He can do this. Izuku paces the hallway leading up to the platform. He’s up first with Shinsou, and honestly this entire match should be easy. So why is he nervous? During the previous two rounds there were other students there to move the attention away from him. But now is different. Now it’s just him and his opponent in front of millions of eyes.

“Hey!”

Izuku isn’t surprised at his mentor’s greeting. He felt him coming a few hallways ago.

“It took a while, but you’re finally getting the hang of One for All!”

The boy gives a weak smile, rubbing his arms together to get rid of his chills. His mentor is in his small form, a soft smile on his face. Izuku can’t bear to look him in the eye for some reason, so he stares at a point on the wall just past him. “Not really. I still haven’t used it much yet.”

“Even still, my boy. You’ve gotten this far without it, so imagine what you’re capable of doing with twenty percent of it.”

Izuku shakes his head. “I’ve just gotten lucky with everything, that’s all.”

For all of his reflexes and training, Izuku isn’t quick enough to dodge the whack to the head his self-deprecation earns him. Another chop follows right after the first, this time to his throat.

Izuku wheezes and shoots him a betrayed look as he tries to force air back into his lungs.

“That’s because you’re always trying your hardest, my dear prince of nonsense! You’ll never be a hero looking so mopey!” All Might

transforms while Izuku's busy pouting, and he pats at his ward's head as if that'll fix what he did. "Now, listen. *Especially* when you're feeling worried or scared, that's when you gotta smile! You've come this far, so show some pride, even if it's fake! Never forget that I'm expecting big things from you!"

Izuku doesn't think he'll ever forget that part. Guilt crawls up his throat and eats away at his insides, but he does as his mentor says and forces himself not to look so gloomy.

He feels kind of floaty as he walks onto the field at the call of the first match. He walks up the steps, heart thumping in his ears. Shinsou is looking right at him, unperturbed. It reminds Izuku faintly of Aizawa.

He steels himself. *Remember why you're doing this.*

"The first match!" Present Mic starts. *"The powerhouse who dominated the first round and apparently really likes chicken, it's Midoriya Izuku from the hero course! Versus the scary-looking—ow!—versus the not-scary-looking General Studies student who's done nothing to stand out so far, Shinsou Hitoshi!"*

Shinsou merely blinks at the intro, and Izuku mirrors his expression. He's played this game with Aizawa plenty of times. The reminder that he's never won even one of those battles with his teacher doesn't help his nerves at all.

"The rules are simple! Win by knocking your opponent out of the ring, immobilizing them, or getting them to say they give up! And fight dirty if you must! Ethics have no meaning here! We've got our good ol' Recovery Girl on standby!"

He has to refrain from getting injured. He doesn't need the healer checking him over and finding something she shouldn't.

Izuku tunes the rest of the rules out. Killing is a no-no, obviously. That's why Cementoss is there. His quirk is the best suited for this.

(And if Izuku were Rabbit in this moment, he'd snap his fingers and whisper in faux disappointment *there goes my plans,* but he's not, so he stays quiet.)

"I give up, huh? Get it, Midoriya?" Oh. His opponent is talking to him. Izuku doesn't like the way his last name sounds on Shinsou's tongue. His first name would suffice. "This battle's going to test your strength of will. If you've got any kind of vision for your future, there's no

sense in worrying about how you get there."

That's a dumb way to look at it, but go off.

"Now let's get this thing started!"

Izuku waits for the go-ahead. That's all he needs to do.

"Like that *monkey* babbling about his stupid pride."

And that's... harsh. Is that what he really thinks, or is he just trying to get a rise out of Izuku?

Either way, Izuku remains neutral. He's been trained to withstand this kind of pressure. He's been bullied for most of his life, so he knows how to handle comments like these. But this time is a bit different since it's not directed at him but instead at one of his classmates.

Still, he stays silent. Despite what everyone thinks, Izuku knows when to shut the hell up. Because back then it was either be quiet or be punished.

Habits never really die, and they're even easier to slip back into. Ojiro doesn't need someone to defend him, he can do that just fine himself. He wouldn't have dropped out if that weren't the case.

"Ready?"

"What kind of dumbass throws away a chance like this?"

"Start!"

Izuku sees it: the shift in Shinsou's stance as he prepares himself. Not to fight, no, but to watch. To react.

He expected Izuku to rush him, that much is obvious. Instead, Izuku stands in his place for a couple of seconds before taking a few steps forward and stopping again. Testing him.

Shinsou remains still.

He's not a fighter. Not physically, at least. There are no muscles underneath that gym uniform of his despite the tall build he has. He'll still be trouble to grapple with since Izuku isn't planning on using any quirks. That's just how weight and gravity works.

"Not going to say anything?" There's a break in his facade. He's

worried. A small crease forms between his thin brows, and Izuku pieces the fragments together.

He's always phrasing his sentences like a question. Ojiro was right, it seems. He can brainwash you if you reply to him, but it has to be an answer of some kind.

He'll win this one for Ojiro for helping him out. Izuku probably would've been out by now without that information.

Present Mic is getting bored. *"Can't you show any emotions, listeners! Is this a staring contest or a battle?"*

The crowd shows their agreement by cheering.

"Must be nice to have everything handed to you, Midoriya Izuku." Shinsou is spitting out his words now. "Thanks to my quirk's nature, I couldn't enter the golden gates. You wouldn't get that. You're naturally blessed."

Blessed. Am I?

Petulant anger makes its way in, but he just grits his teeth. His opponent doesn't know anything about him, so he can't get angry at him. It's not Shinsou's fault.

Izuku reminds himself of how the boy found him in that dumpster. He managed to get him under control then. He could've turned him in, and yet he didn't, so he can't be that bad.

In a way, he's just like Izuku.

Fuck. I need to stop relating to my schoolmates.

"Are all of you hero course students so arrogant that you won't even speak to someone from a lower department? If all the attack on the USJ did was boost everyone's egos, I don't see how it could've been so bad."

And there it is. The snapping point.

Izuku's eyes burn, the familiar tingle of One for All begging to be released, but he holds it back.

"Come on, are you both asleep? The crowds are gonna start booing soon!"

Izuku bares his teeth in what might generously be called a smile—it's

too sharp and haunting and vicious, and yet it's all too familiar for a few people watching somewhere far away on the other side of the screen.

His hands stay at his side as he stalks toward his opponent. Shinsou's panicking now, spouting out more insults that Izuku would've dropkicked anyone else over a long time ago, and Izuku decides quickly that he'll save Present Mic the stress.

He dashes forward the last couple yards and grabs Shinsou by the shoulder with one hand, driving his forearm into his gut and shoving him back toward the line.

"Why won't you spit something out, dammit!" A blur of motion, and a large fist cracks against the side Izuku's face. The boy's head snaps back and makes him stumble a couple yards away.

Izuku pauses, and the world seems to hold its breath. It was a good punch, all things considering, but it must've hurt Shinsou a lot more than it did Izuku with how sloppy his form was. It only pushed Izuku this much away because Shinsou put his entire body weight into it.

He blinks and slowly wipes a speck of blood that's dribbling from his bottom lip. The punch split it open, and now that he's thinking about it he can feel his cheek and mouth throbbing. When he glances back up, Shinsou's expression is full of terror.

But he's not scared of him, no. He's scared of what he stands for.

If you're gonna hit me, hit me harder, Izuku thinks darkly, standing ramrod straight. *You should've knocked me out the first time.*

He goes for him again using the same technique. Shinsou is already close to the line, so it won't take much. Izuku has pulled fridges before; this isn't hard for him. Not physically, at least.

"Trying to push me out? Not gonna happen!" Shinsou sticks his leg out to trip him, but Izuku simply uses it as a stepping stone to jump up and drive his knee into his opponent's chin. Shinsou grunts and grabs for Izuku's throat. "You get out!"

And when he'll look back on this moment much, much later, Izuku will realize that that was an accident, that Shinsou was aiming to grab at his face instead and just block his vision, but the damage is already done.

On reflex, Izuku snatches the wrist holding his neck and fists Shinsou's shirt, spinning around on his heel as he throws the taller boy right over his shoulder.

A move that's been drilled into him for a long, long time.

Shinsou's back slams into the concrete with a painful thud, and Izuku backs off.

"Shinsou is out of the ring!" Midnight calls out. "Midoriya moves on to the second round!"

Izuku calms his breathing, wiping his lip again. A quick fight, and yet he's still left reeling. He supposes he shouldn't be too surprised. He *is* a little injured.

Shinsou is still on the ground, eyes closed. He looks disappointed and upset. Almost... angry.

Izuku walks closer, his shadow falling over the other and making him open his eyes. He extends a hand, trying to find the right words to say. "I know what it's like to be hated for your quirk," he settles on, voice quiet. He really does regret ending the match so soon, but what else could he have done?

Shinsou's face contorts into one of surprise. The rage follows soon after. "Don't spew me that bullshit," he snaps, ignoring the hand entirely. "Your quirk is like a dream compared to others. You don't get to say that."

Perturbed but still not surprised, Izuku silently retracts the offer as Shinsou gets up.

"Goodness gracious! That was anticlimactic! Well, put your hands together for our fierce competitors!"

"Shinsou," he calls out, the cheers of the crowds making it so only he can hear him. "Why do you want to be a hero?"

His schoolmate throws an irritated glance over his shoulder and doesn't hesitate. "We don't get to choose the things we naturally admire."

Izuku looks down, the words reverberating in his skull, and suddenly he's not there. He's in a dark room filled with static. He's watching through someone else's eyes, but the boy in the corner of the room is

still him, just younger. A TV flickers on, illuminating a gaunt face and shallow features. All Might is on the screen, hands on his hips as he answers questions about his latest villain fight.

The younger Izuku has his elbows on his knees, one hand holding the number one hero's plushie and another tightly gripping a knife. The plushie falls to the floor with a muted *thump*. A drop of blood sides off the knife and hits it in the cheek, and the memory falls away.

A wannabe-hero raised as a villain. It doesn't get any more ironic than that.

No, Izuku agrees, Shinsou's words still tearing at his insides. *No, we don't.*

He understands. He does.

Izuku is just about to walk away when voices from above make him snap his head up.

"You were awesome out there, Shinsou!"

"Almost!"

"Had us on the edge of our seats!"

"You're the shining star of us general studies guys!"

Shinsou glances up, looking hesitant and also a bit surprised at the sudden positive feedback. Hell, even the pros are saying good things about him one section over.

"Hear that, Shinsou?" One of his classmates call. *"You're awesome!"*

The boy in question bows his head, letting the praise wash over him. He stops by the hallway entrance, and Izuku waits. "They'll consider transfers to the hero course depending on the results here. Remember that." He shakes his head. "Maybe I failed this time, but... I'm not giving up. I'll show them what it takes to make the hero course, and I'll become a greater hero than *all* of you, got it?"

Izuku's lips quirk up. "Got it. You know, we've got an open seat in 1-A —"

The fuzziness takes over, and then everything is like a movie scene. It's just like that time in the alley. No *Extract* to bother him, no phantom pains of wounds healed long ago—it feels good.

“It’d be easy to mess everything up for you now, so just promise me you won’t lose in a sorry way out there.”

The word escapes him without permission. “Right.” And just like that he’s snapped out of his trance, and it takes everything in him not to go after him again.

Shinsou Hitoshi is peculiar, indeed.

After convincing Recovery Girl that he is *fine* and does *not* need to be checked over, much less healed, Izuku finds his way to the stands.

Uraraka and Iida have saved him a seat, so he sits down next to them and promptly ignores Kacchan’s glare.

He’s definitely suspicious now. Oh well.

The match with Sero and Todoroki has just begun. Even from this far away, Izuku can tell there’s something wrong with his classmate even before he creates the biggest glacier Izuku has ever seen. It’s overkill, if anything, and Sero easily accepts his defeat and earns a chorus of weak *good try’s* from the audience.

Todoroki ends up having to defrost his opponent with his left hand, and to Izuku, something about him just seems sad.

Class B’s Shiozaki Ibara goes against Kaminari, and it’s almost laughable how quick this one goes as well. It’s literally over in an instant, thanks to the girl’s vines.

Izuku frantically pulls out his pocket notebook and scribbles down some notes. She can detach each vine like a piece of regular hair, but will she go bald if she goes overboard? She could build walls with her quirk if she wanted to, but binding enemies seems to be her go-to. Kaminari would’ve had a better chance if he just maneuvered around, but instead he panicked and short circuited himself.

Shiozaki is similar to Kamui Wood. Izuku winces at the reminder of the Wood Hero.

You could rip the vines apart with brutal strength, but your hands will most likely be targeted first. Hm.

“Your match just ended and you’re already thinking strategy-wise?”

Izuku flushes at Uraraka’s question. “Hah, well, not really? It’s just a hobby.”

It used to be, at least.

When Hatsume tricks Iida into helping her showcase her babies to the support company section for a grand total of fifteen minutes, Izuku feels like his skin has cleared. He laughs and writes down all of the details he notices, making a mental reminder to talk to her later about her gear.

Uraraka leaves to prepare for her own match, and she’s obviously nervous. For a second, Izuku considers following, but in the end he decides against it. It’d be a little insulting to offer help when she didn’t ask for it. He knows she has no qualms about getting what she wants, as she was the one to seek him out during the paintball battle, so she obviously doesn’t want his help. Izuku knows she has a plan of her own.

He just hopes it’ll be enough.

Mina wins against Aoyama by damaging his belt and knocking him out with an uppercut to the chin. Tokoyami defeats Youyorozu simply by not giving her enough time to use the objects she’d created. The battle between Tetsutetsu and Kirishima is eventful, however. Both boys are evenly tied, so an arm wrestling match was called in order to settle who would actually move on.

What everyone seems to be waiting for, though, is Kacchan versus Uraraka.

Izuku already knows this won’t end well.

The zero-gravity hero charges first, obviously remembering what Izuku said to her weeks ago about Kacchan always leading with the right hook. His blond friend won’t dodge her advances, however, he’ll confront her.

They're both going all out, and it's a harsh battle to watch for some.

At one point, Uraraka throws her jacket and sends it floating to distract him right after a heavy explosion, but smoke screens just don't work against Kacchan's near impossible reaction times.

She has to touch him to win, that's all. With every attack, Uraraka becomes slower. She goes straight for Kacchan, over and over. Izuku watches, humming a tune to himself.

She's intelligent and strong, but against Kacchan's raw power and explosives, that won't be enough to get her to victory.

Determination can only get you so far.

Izuku is beyond happy when Aizawa tells off the people in the stands for being ignorant and sexist. Kacchan isn't letting his guard down precisely *because* he knows Uraraka is a worthy opponent, not because he just wants an excuse to hit her.

Her last ditch attempt at a win consisted of an asteroid shower from above, and for a brief pause Izuku actually thought she might catch Kacchan off guard, but then his friend had simply blasted all the debris away and stood ready for more.

Her plan, as amazing as it was, had gone up in smoke. She'd exceeded her weight capacity with that last move, rendering her immobile.

"Uraraka is unable to continue. Bakugou moves on to the second round."

Izuku immediately heads for the nurse's office to go see his friend, and he leaves feeling a little sad. Uraraka is upset, that much is obvious, and he can't really blame her. Her fight had been entertaining and rough, so to lose after all that work? It's discouraging.

Uraraka Ochaco is not soft at all. If only she could realize that.

Izuku's own match is coming up, and he won't lie and say he's not nervous. He's on his way to the prep room when he feels it. A familiar energy, a dark pull at his mind that warns him of someone up ahead.

The boy recognizes who it is but doesn't turn around, instead eagerly heading on. Would All Might scold him for picking a fight and not avoiding one? Yes. Does he have to know? No.

“There you are.”

And oh, Endeavor is much taller than Izuku remembers. He has to tilt his head all the way back just to stare him in the face. At least All Might and all his other teachers slouch down a little to help him out—Endeavor does no such thing. He stands tall, face set in a permanent scowl.

Izuku masks his own expression. “Endeavor! I thought this area was reserved for students.”

He is skillfully ignored. “Midoriya Izuku. I’ve heard from some very reliable sources a few things about you. You were at the USJ.”

Incredible deduction. It’s not like all of 1-A was there.

“That quirk of yours is amazing. In terms of power, it seems on par with All Might’s quirk.”

Izuku blinks, slightly put off. Someone gave him access to the recordings, it seems, or had at least given him the spark-notes version. It couldn’t have been Nezu; it must’ve been the police. He’s the number two hero, so it wouldn’t have been hard to convince them to give him what he wants.

“Oh,” Izuku says, faking uninterest, walking away.

“My boy Shouto has a duty to surpass All Might.” At the mention of his classmate, Izuku pauses. “His match against you will prove a valuable test. So give it your all. Put up a good fight against him.”

Izuku frowns. That sounds more like an order than a request. Who the *fuck* does he think he is?

“That’s all I have to say. Sorry for my bluntness.”

That doesn’t sound like a genuine apology, and it obviously wasn’t meant to be one with how Endeavor turns away from him, prepared to walk off.

Oh fuck no. Izuku can’t just leave it at this. “I’m not All Might,” he says evenly.

A brief, scornful pause, and then: “That’s obvious—”

“Of course it is.” Izuku tilts his head to stare at him, back still facing him. ”And Todoroki is not you. If you keep up that line of thinking,

Endeavor, you might get hurt.”

There's an angry grunt, and the sound of flames growing higher and hotter has Izuku smirking to himself. Oh, *Extract wants* this quirk.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Endeavor asks threateningly.

“Nothing, sir.”

Honestly, Izuku regrets not walking the other direction. This is tiresome. He really should start charging people for wasting his time.

He strolls away with his hands in his pockets. “Oh, and I have one question, Endeavor.” The hero scoffs in response, and Izuku straightens up. He keeps his face as devoid of emotion as humanly possible, but his eyes are a different story. Mirth just barely edges into his voice as he asks, the epitome of innocence, “How long did it take you to fix up your office?”

By the time the number two hero registers the comment, Izuku has started walking again. *That’s for grooming your son to fight my mentor.*

“You little—”

Izuku is already on the field, jogging up the steps of the platform so he doesn’t keep everyone waiting.

Todoroki eyes him. “You ready?”

Present Mic saves Izuku from having to reply. *“Both of these competitors have won top marks in this festival so far! But there’s only room for one of these greats in the ring! It’s Midoriya versus Todoroki!”*

It’s easy to guess what will happen first. The boy is going to come at Izuku with his ice. He’ll have to be ready immediately.

“Start!”

Todoroki immediately releases a large attack, similar to that of his match against Sero. Izuku isn’t surprised by this in the slightest. He has his ring on, but twenty percent won’t do much against a large chunk of ice like that. He’ll have to endure it.

Izuku drops to one knee and throws up his arms just as the ice encircles him. No one will be able to see him like this, and for that he’s grateful. He can use some of his quirks if he does it right.

Yeah, he's only a little bit of a hypocrite.

The ice encases him in a sort of prison almost, and Izuku blinks as he sees his own breath in the air.

He's not stuck, thanks to *Deflect* stopping the ice from the front. He drops his defense and begins to chip away at the ice, kicking it with *Boost* as his armor. He blasts through it after a final hit, and small chunks of ice go flying.

"I expected as much," Todoroki mutters.

"Woah! He managed to break through it!"

Another wave of ice comes toward him, this one much smaller, however. Izuku sees it coming and darts to the side, just barely staying inside the boundary lines as he manages to skirt the attack.

Todoroki's fights always end in a flash. Izuku doesn't know much else about him, so he'll have to learn while fighting. That's fine, though. Izuku's good at that.

His classmate has a wall of ice behind him as a counter strategy in case Izuku uses his quirk. The boy won't be getting blown away anytime soon unless Izuku gets closer, so there's no point to using high percentages of One for All anyway.

Todoroki drives his foot into the ground and sends a thick sheet of frost covering the cement, obviously trying to encase Izuku's legs and work his way up. Izuku jumps over it just in time, legs burning, and he easily maintains his balance on the slippery slope. He crouches there, slightly elevated, and watches.

"So you're trying to stretch the match out?" Todoroki bites. "Not happening. I'll end this quickly."

Everyone has a limit.

The fourth attack heads straight for him, and Izuku narrows his eyes. He leaps off of his little ledge and kicks the ice straight back toward Todoroki. The dual-quirked user throws up another wall in front of him just in time to keep from getting impaled by his own ice.

Izuku doesn't let him rest. He shoots forward and punches at the wall, but when the ice is smashed away there's no Todoroki in sight.

Extract stabs at his mind and Izuku moves away just in time as Todoroki comes crashing down from above, ice at the ready in his palm. Ah, he tried to immobilize Izuku.

“Close one!” He wheezes.

“And Midoriya is now on the offensive!”

He barely has time to collect himself as yet another wave of ice comes toward him. Todoroki doesn’t hesitate at all, it seems. Izuku shouldn’t be surprised—he was trained by Endeavor himself.

Izuku balls up a fist and smashes it, red lightning zipping across his skin. There’s a huge rush of air from the movement and people shout in excitement. Present Mic says something, but Izuku is too busy catching his breath to focus on anything else. His stomach wound is screaming at him.

Finish this, dammit. No more stalling.

“Now that’s a lot stronger than your earlier attacks.”

He must be confused as to why Izuku didn’t use that much power earlier as well. *Good. Keep him guessing.*

Todoroki has excellent judgment, execution, and mobility. He is, in all senses, strong.

Izuku rubs at his arm. It’s buzzing uncomfortably from the punch, even though it’s not broken. Even with the ring, fifteen percent hurts.

“You’re getting exhausted. This entire festival has taken a toll on you,” his opponent continues.

Izuku could argue the same for him. Ice sticks to Todoroki’s cheek and arm, and if Izuku looks close enough he can see that he’s shivering. He’s getting cold.

The crowd is going wild by now, most of the people still in awe about Todoroki and his sheer prowess. The boy is undeniably already stronger than most pros out there. As expected from the son of the number two hero.

The boy glances off to the side. “Sorry for all this. I appreciate it, though, Midoriya. Thanks to you, he doesn’t look too happy.”

Izuku follows his gaze, scowling when he spots the bitch in question

standing off to the side.

“Let’s end this.”

The next attack is even stronger than before, but it’s repetitive. Izuku knows how to break through them now.

“Todoroki continues his relentless assault! Could this next move win it all?”

Izuku rushes toward it head on. “I’ve fought worse than you with less sleep, Todoroki. Who says I’m done?”

Twenty percent. The max I can do with my ring on and without breaking myself. It’ll have to be enough.

He rears his arm and leg back, hitting first with his foot and twisting midair to smash it again with his fist in a magnificent display. The pressure has Todoroki stumbling back, but another wall is put up to prevent him from passing the line.

“You’re shivering, Todoroki,” Izuku breathes out, waiting. Watching. Todoroki is trembling now, his tremors worse than before. “Quirks are just physical abilities. You have a limit to how much cold you can bear. But then again, you could always use your left side to thaw yourself out, right?”

He faintly hopes Endeavor is listening. He also hopes the man can hear the big *fuck you* Izuku is giving him right now without the boy actually saying it.

“You’re not your father, Todoroki. You’re just not!”

Hypocrite, a dark voice at the back of his mind hisses at him, but he pushes it away. That’s—that’s different. This isn’t about him right now. If he can help someone in a similar situation, he’ll do it.

Izuku is getting way too tired for this. He needs to provoke him. “You want to be number one, right? So give me everything you have.”

“What are you planning?” Todoroki looks suddenly angry, like a wild, cornered animal. “Everything I have? Did my bastard of a father pay you off or something?” For the first time, he’s the one who runs forward. “You’re pissing me off!”

Honestly, that’s kind of insulting. Endeavor would have to pay Izuku a lot to get him to do anything for him.

Izuku waits until the last second and weaves to the side, ducking and slamming a powered fist into his opponent's stomach. Ice races up his own arm, and Izuku is forced back a few steps as Todoroki goes flying.

"What a hit! Things are really heating up!"

The fire and ice user slams to the ground while Izuku straightens up, trying to get the ice off of his skin.

A few people in the crowds are in awe. "He landed a hit on Todoroki!" One of them gasps, more like a question than a statement.

Izuku doesn't give him a chance to get up fully. He rushes for him again, and a much weaker ice attack is sent straight at him. Izuku easily kicks through it and tackles Todoroki, bringing him to the ground. *Put him in a lock. The only way for him to get me off is to burn me.*

He tries to wrap his legs around the bigger teen's throat, but an elbow jabs him in the stomach—right where it hurts the worst.

For the first time this festival, Izuku cries out.

He feels something rip slightly, and his grip loosens just enough for Todoroki to chuck him to the side. Izuku doesn't right himself immediately this time. He stays on his hands and knees for a moment, riding through the waves of pain, the inside of his cheek nearly splitting open with how hard he's biting it to keep quiet.

And then he's up, the pain fading away into something more bearable. He's angry now. He's not supposed to get injured. His adrenaline is pumping now, and Izuku is hit with a sudden need to just *help* this boy.

"Todoroki!" He bellows, a red hue to his gaze now. His entire body is buzzing. He needs to release this energy. "It's *your* power! Your power, not his!"

"Shut up."

Todoroki entire right side is covered in ice now. If Izuku didn't know better, he'd think it to be frostbite. He's so obviously hurting himself, and he's not doing a thing to stop it. He could so easily activate his left side and put an end to that suffering, but he doesn't.

Fine. If that's how it's going to be, Izuku will just hit him where it

hurts.

His voice drops so the boy has to strain to listen. “You want to be a hero so badly? You’re only using half of your power. What kind of hero limits himself like that?”

“Shut up!”

There’s a small spark, a tiny tendril peeking from out of Todoroki’s eye. He’s close.

Push him there. Don’t let him fall down the same hole as you.

Izuku steels his resolve and takes a sledgehammer to his classmate’s metaphorical ice wall. “It’s your power! You can do what you want with it! It’s yours, not his! *You are not a slave to your blood!”*

It’s like something snaps. Todoroki pauses, eyes going wide and unseeing as he remembers words no one else can hear. And then the light returns, and the next thing Izuku knows is *fire.*

Hot, scorching fire. Flames explode out of Todoroki’s left side and lick up his body. The heat burns from even this much distance away, but Izuku doesn’t mind it. The pain reminds him that he’s alive and that he’s here, and that’s all he can ask for.

People shine, just as stars do. And Todoroki is *burning.*

Izuku kind of wants to burn, too.

“What’s this?” Present Mic gasps, his voice getting lost amidst the sudden cheering from the crowds.

Todoroki huffs. “I thought you wanted to win? Dammit. Why are you trying to inspire me when you’re not even taking this seriously?”

Izuku completely ignores him. So he’s a hypocrite, whatever. He can live with that.

“Shouto!”

Of course someone has to ruin the moment.

“So you’ve finally accepted it! Yes! Excellent!” Endeavor stomps closer to the edge of the arena, his own red flames spinning wildly above and around him. “It all starts now for you! With my blood pumping through your veins, you will surpass me! You will fulfill my

ambitions!"

Izuku snaps around to glare at him, patience running thin. "God, be quiet! I bet you don't even have a pass to be here!"

Todoroki laughs suddenly, bringing Izuku's attention back to the beauty of his fire.

"A sudden pep talk from Mr. Endeavor, huh? What a doting parent." Present Mic says, just a tad bit of sarcasm bleeding through.

"What're you smiling about?" Todoroki is staring at him now, something Izuku's never seen before dancing in his eyes. "You must be crazy."

That's not far off actually.

Todoroki matches his grin. "I'm not responsible for what happens to you now."

And then a huge block of ice, almost as big as the glacier used against Sero, comes hurtling toward Izuku, and his opponent's fire extends even further.

For a fraction of a second that seems to stretch forever, red lightning dances across Izuku's body, his skin glittering and his shadow darkening. The scent of ozone mixes in with the flames, and his eyes reflect brilliant orange and yellow hues.

The crowd waits with bated breath, because *holy shit.* This is a sharp contrast to the boy they saw drop his chicken wing on stage during the athlete's oath.

When Izuku pushes from the ground and shoots toward the other boy, he can barely track his own trajectory. It happens so fast that to others it seems Midoriya just disappears from his spot. He clears the glacier entirely, reappearing in midair as he dives for Todoroki.

His legs burn and his gym uniform sizzles with the twenty percent power. He's gotta get close.

"Midnight!" Cementoss shouts. "He won't be able to take it!" The cement ripples forward, probably to make a wall to minimize the damage, but Izuku is already past it. It's too late for anyone to stop him.

Rabbits are always just a step ahead.

He pulls back a fist, his other hand holding his stomach to brace himself.

Between the shouts of the audience and the commentary coming from the booth, Izuku hears his classmate's soft breath as he nears, just a few yards away now.

Aim for the chest.

"Midoriya. Thank you."

The cold air expands. Lightning and fire collide in a brilliant explosion of heat and power, and flames climb up Izuku's body as he's blown backwards, the world turning a blinding white. The aftershock seems to shake the earth, and his arm raises at the last second, *Pull* on his fingertips.

He's yanked forward a little, but he doesn't stop. His quirk merely slows him down, which is what he needs. He crashes into a stray pillar of ice, the air being knocked out of him, and he waits with stars in his eyes until the smoke clears.

It's okay. He doesn't mind losing to Todoroki. It's fine. He helped him —

"Todoroki is out of bounds. Midoriya advances to the third round!"

What.

Izuku pushes himself up, biting back another cry.

Todoroki is sprawled in the grass on the far side of the arena, Izuku's punch having hit him directly in the chest. Huh. Izuku must have gotten close enough to break the wall behind him after all. But the only reason Izuku isn't out of bounds is because he used *Pull* on the stadium, hoping he'd be slowed enough not to cross the boundary line.

It seems it worked.

Midnight pulls him out of the crater with a strong arm, her keen eyes scanning him over for injuries. "You don't look too hurt, but I'd recommend seeing Recovery Girl anyway."

Izuku wipes off the debris and spare flecks of ice on his uniform,

giving her a small smile. “I’m fine, sensei! If she heals me I might get tired before my next match. I’ll make sure to see her after all this is over!”

He doesn’t wait to hear the R-Rated hero’s reply, he just turns tail and runs—well, hobbles—right back into the stadium, flushing at the influx of cheers following him.

By the time Izuku is certain Recovery Girl won’t hunt him down and he can finally stop hiding, two matches have passed. His stitches are fine, it turns out. They’re a little worse for wear, and they definitely won’t be able to take any more elbows, but they’re okay.

He just has to be careful.

Izuku’s next match with Iida comes all too soon and ends just as quickly. He could barely stand on his own two feet, and Izuku feels kind of bad. He really should’ve dropped out, seeing as using *Pull* against Todoroki at the very end felt kind of like cheating.

The fight consisted of a lot of ducking and weaving until Izuku managed to spot an opening and take out Iida’s engines with a well-placed kick. The falter was enough for Izuku to throw the boy right over the line. Iida had him in a hold too, so Izuku was sent stumbling right after him. The only reason he won is because Iida hit the ground first.

And for once, Izuku doesn’t sport any injuries directly caused by his opponent after a fight.

The rest of the matches go by just as he predicted it, so when the fated battle finally arrives, Izuku kind of wants to die. He feels more at rest with this fight, though, weirdly enough. He’s glad that it’s Kacchan he has to go up against. He knows how he's feeling. He can let his guard down around him and not worry about screwing up.

Izuku skipped the prep room in favor of acquiring a nice energy drink (it turns out that vending machines are easy to steal from), so he downs the can of Monster and walks up the steps to the arena, meeting Kacchan’s knowing glare.

“At last, we’ve arrived! The best of the best among UA’s first years will be decided! It’s the final match. Midoriya vs. Bakugou!”

“Excited yet?” Izuku teases, but it’s breathless.

Kacchan's eyes narrow. "I finally get a chance to blow your ass up on TV and you aren't even at your full health. You better make up for that. Go all-out."

Izuku knows what he really means behind those words, and he sighs. He's not forcing him to use his quirks this time, as he's learned his lesson, but he's still technically asking.

"Begin!"

Kacchan always starts first. Izuku tries to counter with an attack of his own, but his friend just blasts through the punch and grabs him by the arm, throwing him to the side. Izuku has a grip on his shirt, though, and now they're both grappling with just their own strength.

Kacchan seems to come to a realization during their struggle. "You dumbass," he hisses. "You were hurt this entire time."

Izuku receives a blast to the face at Kacchan's revelation. He jumps back, dodging another mini explosion before darting forward.

There's no time for the blond to react as Midoriya twists with the leftover momentum, spinning on his heel to bring his foot up.

There's a sickening snap as Kacchan goes flying through the air, the force of the kick sending him skidding across the concrete. His uniform tears to reveal raw skin, but that hardly stops him. He keeps going at him, again and again and again.

Kacchan rushes for him, Izuku meeting him head on as he tries to redirect most of the hits.

Now this is the fight the crowd wants to see. Little to no talking, just raw skill and strength. It's brutal and fast-paced; a certified attention-grabber.

It still hurts like fuck, though. Izuku is going to pass out if this goes on any longer. It might be very soon, actually.

Fortunately, the fight takes a turn.

Izuku tries to dodge, but Kacchan's faster. The explosion makes him see stars, and the boy's sent sprawling through the air.

He gasps, chasing the air that's forced out of his lungs. Izuku scrambles to his knees, only to have his face meet the concrete when

Kacchan lands a kick to his jaw.

Izuku's on his back now, and he can barely hear the crowd's yelling over the ringing in his ears.

Something wet is trickling down his cheek, but Izuku doesn't have time to see what it is before Kacchan's on top of him.

He manages to block the first punch, but the second and third are much harder, and his fists are blasted out of the way.

He whines as the heat races up his arms and irritates the slight burns from his fight with Todoroki. A fist collides with his nose with a snap, and blood begins to pour from his nostrils.

"This is not looking good for Midoriya!" Present Mic yells, sounding shocked. *"What a brutal fight!"*

The pro hero is right. Kacchan isn't even using his quirk now, just pummeling Izuku like they do every time they spar. But then he pauses, just for a moment, just for a breath.

"Come on, nerd. Don't make yourself look like a fool."

Izuku has to think fast or his chances of winning will be swept out from under him.

Kacchan raises his fist yet again, eyes blazing and mouth set in a determined scowl, when Izuku sees his chance.

He jerks his knee between Kacchan's legs and the blond's grip on him falters. Izuku catches his fist and twists it, using his other hand to grab Kacchan's shoulder as he flips them.

Now Izuku is on top, and Present Mic is screaming something about a slug fest, but Izuku doesn't pay him any mind.

He doesn't aim for the throat. He isn't that cruel, at least, not while he's being filmed live.

Izuku can't move away in time when Kacchan raises a palm to blast him in the face, making them both scramble to their feet. Another explosion, and Izuku probably would have gone flying had his opponent not curled his fingers around Izuku's shirt and tried to throw him over his shoulder using the momentum.

He's ready for this, however, and when he's directly above Kacchan he

lets One for All manifest in his arm and promptly smashes his fist into his face.

The explosive teen's head snaps back, his grip loosening on Izuku's shirt. Izuku rolls when he hits the ground, not giving the other boy a chance to recover before he kicks him in the back.

Kacchan whirls, fists hissing with the threat of fire, and then they're back to fighting close hand, both too exhausted to go back to chasing each other.

They dodge and throw punches and kicks at each other like they always do when they spar. The explosions are so frequent that the smoke can't dissipate fast enough, and soon a thick layer of gray and white obscure the pair from view.

Izuku can feel him at all times. He has a pretty good idea of where he is and where he's going inside the bubble of smoke. All he has to do is let his friend stay on the offensive. If he gets him annoyed he'll eventually tire himself out.

The boy rushes at him, Izuku aiming to land a hit on his cheek. Kacchan just jumps to the side and blasts his hand out of the way, and suddenly the ground beneath Izuku sways.

His powers taste about as promising as the copper between his teeth—*and when did that happen,* he wonders. *Extract* twitches, and he's thrown under an icy wave.

He can hear his father's harsh words. He sees his cold grin and feels his sizzling hands on his throat. Izuku is rooted to the spot.

Todoroki's fire must've brought back memories, memories that he's repressed a long time ago. But now they're resurfacing through his quirk, and quite honestly Kacchan isn't making the situation any better with the popping of his explosions.

Izuku shouldn't be here. He should've just left the country a while ago. He thinks back to the battle training, back to how Bakugou pushed him despite knowing Izuku's reasons for holding back.

He's always been by Izuku, at least when it counted the most, and yet he'll never truly understand. He can't even begin to comprehend the terror that keeps his friend up at night.

Blinding, reasonless, stupid. Kacchan's crude lack of understanding

makes swallowing his pride akin to swallowing a star: impossible.

Izuku reaches to fiddle with his ring, for any form of comfort, of independence, of freedom.

But—

It's not there.

Kacchan must've blown it off when he blasted his hand away. That would explain the wetness in his throat.

Izuku should respond, say *anything* to get Kacchan to back off for a second and let him reevaluate, but he's too busy trying to breathe. The memories are still fresh in his mind. A dark shadow moves through the haze, a hand reaching for his face, and Izuku still can't fucking *see* correctly.

His arms move up on their own, his instincts taking over and turning his thoughts black, and then his hands are wrapping around sweaty skin.

Izuku's quirks cheer, white-hot pain flashing through him for the briefest of moments, and Kacchan screams. Any other time and Izuku would be screaming, too.

His hands retracts from Kacchan's skin just as the explosion shoots from the blond's palms and illuminates the space around them.

The shockwave is enough to make the entire arena shudder as dust and debris wash over them. Izuku flies through the air, only half aware of what's happening, and time seems to slow to give him time to process.

Force. In his blind panic, Izuku used a no-no quirk on his friend. Fuck.

And then his back hits the wall and everything is weird from there. He knows he's out of bounds, that's for sure. He was too tired and distracted to use *Pull* this time to save his ass, but that doesn't matter right now.

He needs to know if Kacchan is okay. He's never used that quirk on him before, he's never used that quirk on *anyone* since back then.

Oh, god, what if he—?

He falls to the ground, his entire body feeling numb. He doesn't feel

anything as he stumbles toward his friend. Red sparks are still coming off of him, his eyes slightly wild as he comes down from the high *Force* left him in. He doesn't know how it happens, but when he comes back to himself his ring is back on his finger and he's guiding Kacchan to Recovery Girl's office, supporting him with a shoulder.

He's okay. It's okay. They're okay.

Losing to Kacchan isn't bad compared to losing Kacchan himself.

"Was that all-out enough for you?" Izuku jokes, swallowing back the delayed river of blood.

Kacchan gives a weak laugh, surprising him. "Yeah, nerd."

It's enough.

Shouta sees it the moment it happens. Can *feel* it in the way the air changes around him.

There's a brief second of reprieve accompanied by a bone-chilling silence. There are no flashes of light through the dark cloud of smoke, no screams of rage or teasing insults.

It's music to Shouta's ears, so of course it doesn't last very long.

A blast of red and black cuts through the smoke, clearing all of the haze from the air and revealing Midoriya and Bakugou yet again to the crowds and hundreds of cameras.

It happens quick, and Shouta feels a weight drop in his stomach at the sight of both of the boys' faces. Midoriya's hands retract from Bakugou's body, and the explosion that follows has Hizashi falling out of his chair and nearly making everyone within the vicinity go deaf with his half-excited-half-panicked scream of *holy shit!*

Shouta barely registers Nezu's quiet *language, please;* he's too busy

trying to make sense of what just happened.

This explosion isn't like the one during Midoriya's fight with Todoroki. That one was a culmination of desperation and raw power as it destroyed everything in its way—this one seems to be more frantic. Almost accidental, dare he say.

Midoriya stumbles to his feet, leaving an imprint of his body in the arena's wall as he rushes to his friend's smoking form on the other side of the platform.

And with this horrific scene now ingrained in his mind forever, Shouta suddenly understands it. The dynamic.

There are things that need to be proven, a ranking that must be cemented.

Bakugou needs to know that he has the power to break Midoriya and always come out ahead; Midoriya that he has the power to take and take, keep on taking everything that Bakugou gives without breaking.

They are both stubborn, unyielding in their own ways; at a constant stalemate in a competition to see who is more perfect in his role.

Always provoking the other, always testing the limits. This time seems to simply be a culmination of that.

Shouta leans back in the comfort of his sleeping bag a little while after the fight, watching with half-lidded eyes as All Might hands out the medals and gives his speech. It's too long for Shouta to pay attention to, so he focuses back on Midoriya.

Perhaps one day the two boys will mellow and learn to accept their friendship without hate. But for now they will continue to feed on each other's insecurities, unapologetic and entirely desperate.

It's selfish, in a way, and Shouta realizes that this is perhaps the only time he'll see Midoriya fight solely for himself.

He shakes his head and downs the rest of his cold coffee. His children are nothing but problems.

"And that concludes our contest! The first year winner of UA's sports festival is Bakugou Katsuki of Class A!"

And if Shouta smiles when Midoriya leans over to his friend and mouths something that looks suspiciously like *198 points, Kacchan* when the blond gets too cocky over his win, well, nobody has to know.

Izuku doesn't patrol after school, but he does walk the length of the city.

It's quiet out, which almost never happens in Japan. The streets are bustling with workers and students heading home, and yet everything is almost muted somehow. People talking, cars honking, doors slamming—it's all a low buzz that acts as a backdrop to his thoughts.

He feels floaty, like he's still under Shinsou's quirk, like none of this is quite real, like this joy inside him will be over soon.

And it will be. He knows that much. He has his belongings packed, his bags ready to go. He's going to finish up the last bit of stuff he needs to take care of and then, early in the morning, drop Missy off at Kacchan's house.

Is it cowardice? Leaving without a trace or a note explaining at least why? Of course.

But Izuku's always been a bit of a coward. Perhaps that's why he became Rabbit in the first place; he wanted a way to come out of his shell, a way to express the thoughts he'd never dare to as just Izuku.

Just for a month or so. I'll come back. It won't be forever. He repeats these words like a mantra, like a decree. *It doesn't have to be forever.*

Izuku managed to evade Recovery Girl for a short while after the awards ceremony. She's quicker than she looks, as she ended up dragging him back to her makeshift nurse's office within just a few minutes of him trying to escape. All she had to fix was his face and the minor cuts on his arms and legs.

What she doesn't know is that she also healed part of his stomach during it, and Izuku isn't about to be the one to tell her that now. He's exhausted now, but he feels better.

Better than he has in a long time.

This is happiness, right? That weird limbo between pain and peace. It feels bitter on his tongue, but he guesses that just comes with the territory.

The sun has long since disappeared by the time Izuku makes it to the beach. *The* beach. The one he accepted One for All at. The one where he spent ten months of his life training with the number one hero. It's crazy to look back on it now, right before he's about to leave it all behind, and think about how far he's come. He's built up a relationship with All Might—his idol, his enemy, his murderer by birthright, and he *doesn't regret it.* He remembers what the hero told him during the ceremony, how he leaned in for a tight hug after putting the second place medal over Izuku's head, his quiet *I'm so proud of you* right by his ear that was almost too much for Izuku to handle, his throat having closed up in response. He's also made friends in the short time since school has started, something he never thought would happen again. He's made enemies, sure, but that shows that he's lived.

He's still here. Even if it's just for a few more short moments.

The dark waves lap at the shore, stopping and receding right before they can touch Izuku's shoes. The salty air makes him scrunch his nose, but it's not until the moon is high in the sky that he leaves.

Missy needs to be fed. He bought her a nice dinner for tonight. A last celebration, if you will.

He turns and walks back toward his part of the city, tapping twice on the screen on his forearm. He put his AI in his locker for the majority of the festival, not wanting to get outed, and he put her back on after leaving school. Kacchan went home to rest, the happenings of the last fight having taken a toll on him. Izuku said goodbye to Uraraka at the front gate, but Iida was nowhere to be seen. A family emergency, Uraraka told him. The boy left during Izuku's fight with Kacchan.

There's something weird there, but it's not like Izuku can do anything about it now.

"Hey, AINA, what did I miss from today's archives?"

There’s no reply, and he frowns to himself as he glances at the blank screen. Hm. He could’ve sworn he charged her this morning. Oh well. It’s not a big deal to him at the moment.

He’s still high off of the giddiness he got while on that stage. Second place, huh? All for One can suck a dick. His precious little successor doesn’t need his help anymore.

Izuku is so pleased at this thought that he doesn’t think anything of the extra pairs of eyes on him. He doesn’t think anything of the tight feelings starting to coil in his stomach. His body aches a little from the activities of the day, but he’s still happy.

He’s comfortable, and Izuku should’ve known it wouldn’t last long. He walks home with a little bounce to his step, a bandage on his cheek as a reminder of his fight with Todoroki, and he walks faster at the thought of greeting Missy and getting to play with her one last time.

Just over six hours until he has to leave for the airport. His fake ID and passport are in his packed suitcase, ready to go.

He doesn't want to leave, *god* he doesn't want to, but in this very moment it feels like he has no other choice.

Fate, however, seems to have a different plan.

His hand reaches for the door, a sing-song greeting for Missy on the tip of his tongue, and he twists the knob.

And then, for the third time that day, the world around him explodes.

Chapter End Notes

there is a halo in your mouth
and you like how it burns

n

ghosts with heartbeats

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku has always joked about dying. He's skirted death so many times that he's taken to calling himself immortal. He won't be for long, of course, but he'll cross that bridge when he gets there.

Literally.

This must be some sort of punishment for making too many jokes. Izuku would like to apologize to whatever deity up above he's offended this time. He might not mean the apology, but there's not much else he can do to make up for it at the moment. Give him a break, dammit, he's not having a very good day.

The explosion has Izuku flying back, his back hitting the hallway wall with so much force that he ends up smashing right through it as if it's nothing more than wet paper. He hits the ground hard and chokes, inhaling a lungful of dust and ash when he tries to force the oxygen back into his lungs.

It's like a chain reaction. There's multiple clicks in the distance, and then Izuku sees stars as the building is wracked with more explosions. *Bombs,* his mind helpfully inputs. *They're fucking bombs.*

Oh, he's on fire now. That's fun.

Heat races up his arms and legs, singeing some of his hair as it reaches his neck and head. The flames make quick work of his uniform, and a scream tears its way out of his throat when another bomb goes off right next to him, this time sending him face-first into the neighboring wall.

Izuku slides down, eyes wide and unseeing. He can't—he can't breathe anymore. It's too hot in here. *Way* too hot. Now if he were in a better state of mind he'd make a joke about how smoking hot he is, but this isn't the time.

He tastes copper on his tongue, and then there's something wet staining the only remaining parts of his school shirt. It has to be blood seeing as he has a fucking *piece of metal* lodged into his side, the exposed end of it cutting straight through his bicep and exposing the

muscle.

Fantastic. The day he finally gets healed and this shit happens.

Extract takes a sledgehammer to his skull, and Izuku *screams*. He doesn't know what the hell is happening, he doesn't know what to do, what he even *can* do.

There are people approaching from outside the building. A lot of them. He can feel them all thanks to his piece-of-shit traitorous quirk. There must be twenty of them out there. They were all waiting for him, which means they had this all planned out from the start.

This is why they stopped following him so abruptly the other night. You give someone the illusion of freedom, and then take what you want from them anyway; it's the oldest trick in the book, and Izuku thought he countered this. He had plans to leave the entire fucking *country* in just a few hours time—but he was still too late. He should've known freedom wouldn't come so easily.

This is his mistake, and now he's paying for it. No, everyone will pay for it. Missy will pay for—

His heart leaps into his throat. *Missy*.

White-hot pain rushes through his body immediately after he tries to move. He can barely breathe, so maybe moving isn't the best idea. The pipe in his side is limiting him, and it's not like he can just pull it. If it struck something important, that might be the only thing keeping him from bleeding out.

"Mi—!" Ash flies into his mouth and he chokes. His chest feels like it's cracking, and the blood that fills up his mouth becomes the only thing protecting him from swallowing more debris. He tries again, but this time he can't even get the first syllable out.

No. He can't lose her. He can't—he can't handle it. This is his own fault. He should've never taken her in. Should've never put her in harm's way like this. And it's so *unfair* that Izuku feels his eyes start to burn, and it's not just because of the fire raging around him.

Another explosion rocks the earth, and then the floor gives way beneath him. He drops like a rock, One for All humming through his veins instinctually, as if to help. His power can do nothing, though, and when he lands the world slips away from him for a brief couple seconds. When he comes to, he's on his side, the pipe now lodged

further inside him with a huge slab of concrete crushing his lower half to the ground. He's a couple floors down now, and when he gathers up enough strength to tilt his head and look up, he sees that the uppermost floors have all caved in from the middle, revealing a large hole that allows him to look straight through.

Missy, please. He chokes back something sharp in his throat, face tightening. *Please, god.*

Izuku, despite his many jokes, has never been very religious. That's not something his father ever focused on. And yet, at this moment, he finds himself praying to whoever can hear him. He doesn't want her to die. It'd be too cruel. It's not her fault he's a walking time bomb.

As he reaches out with his mind, trying desperately to find something that might help, he realizes with delayed relief that the people around him are disappearing. They're flickering out, like stars too old to sustain themselves. They're... leaving? He must be wrong. Has to be. Is it a warp gate? Perhaps it's Kurogiri, but then why doesn't he feel him?

No. This isn't like All for One at all. His father wouldn't leave him to die like this. He's too prideful. He'd want to kill Izuku himself, or at the very least take him back and break him. But the attackers' quirks are dying out, so that means they're gone. Which doesn't make sense in the slightest.

The ringing in his ears is faint now, and all he can hear is the fire blazing around him. His mind feels hazy. Every breath is a stab between his ribs, and red and orange embers float past his vision almost delicately.

He tries to call out again, but a cackling board falls next to him and sends up a cloud of black smoke and ash, clouding his vision.

Is he dying? If there's anything he's learned from all those bootlegged movies, it's that death usually comes in a flash of light; it's supposed to be a comforting presence against the darkness, not whatever this is. He didn't think it would be like this.

And as the cloud clears up, he sees a figure standing precariously near the edge of the top floor, looking down. The fire illuminates the figure's build, casting a dark shadow across its face and body. White eyes find his, and another spike is sent through Izuku's heart once he feels that familiar intensity and bloodcurdling power.

Ah. His follower is back yet again.

Jagged tendrils billow out behind his keeper, and Izuku swears he sees something limp being held in one of those shadowed hands, but then the figure disappears before he can make any sense of it.

His shock lasts half a moment. Then it hits him at once. All of his attackers are gone now. He can't feel them anymore. He's safe.

Safe from them, at least. From everything else? The odds aren't looking to be in his favor. But then again, when are they ever?

The building is starting to collapse around him, and the weight of the situation is slowly starting to dawn on him. Oh, how quickly things can start falling apart.

Missy couldn't have survived for this long.

The mere thought hurts him worse than any of the numerous wounds he's sporting right now. Something so fundamental to his very being has just been torn away, and the lack of it is like boiling water down his spine. His quirks are slipping away from him, his grip on reality being held by a single thread. Is this how it feels to be blinded?

He forces himself onto his back, spine twisting painfully since his legs are pinned down, and his eyes settle on the blackened ceiling above. Everything is fuzzy. He can barely hear correctly. He feels like a radio with a connection that keeps breaking up, and the result is this staticky feeling worming its way into his mind. His hand curls briefly around his throat, if only to make sure he's not already dead, and when it comes away it's sticky and warm.

And then he's pulled underwater, and Izuku can't swim, so he does the next best thing. He drowns.

Not literally—although maybe, he thinks, just maybe, that might be for the best. Water floods his lungs, mixing with the ash, and the worst part is it actually doesn't.

But it *does.* He feels the insatiable burn, and bubbles race one another to break the surface when the remaining air is forced from his lungs. Izuku does not break the surface.

He can't.

I'm so sorry, he thinks, but it doesn't sound like himself. *I'm sorry for*

not being enough, Tsukauchi. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Izuku drowns in an ocean of smoke and debris, and not for the first time does he wish things would end quicker.

His eyes have long since fluttered shut by the time the cracked device on his arm lights up, the signal finally coming back on, but only for a moment.

A moment is more than enough.

Emergency Protocol 'Last Resort' Initiated.

Password: 'dadzawa'.

Shouta is in the middle of tying up the latest Petty Criminal of the Week when he gets the call.

It's currently a little past twelve in the morning. Patrol today doesn't end until one, his shift having been shortened due to the Sports Festival—which is why he's confused as to why someone's calling him on his personal cell when his patrol hasn't ended yet.

All of his friends and coworkers know not to bother him while he's working unless it's an emergency.

He fishes out his phone after handing the criminal over to the nearest police officer. "What is it? This better be—"

"Aizawa. Where are you right now?"

The hero immediately tenses up, jerking the phone away from his ear to stare at the caller ID, as if to make sure he's hearing this right. Detective Tsukauchi rarely sounds this urgent.

"I'm a few blocks away from the courthouse," he replies, already taking to the rooftops. "Where do you need me?"

“I need you to head towards City Hall. It’s an emergency. I’ve already sent two units there under suspicion of villainous activity.”

His voice gives way to panic, and Shouta jumps to the neighboring building, mapping out the route in his head. “Do you have anywhere more specific?”

The detective laughs something dark. *“Trust me, you won’t be able to miss it.”*

Oh. This can’t be good.

“Tsukauchi, what’s happening?” There’s a beat of silence, and Shouta feels his throat tighten up unexpectedly. “Tsukauchi!”

He sounds reluctant. *“I got a text a few minutes ago. An abandoned building is on fire and nearly under collapse. We think it must’ve been a bomb of some sort. Multiple ones.”*

A bomb. Which means this was probably planned, not accidental. *Suspicion of villainous activity* sounds way more plausible all of a sudden.

“Is there anyone in it? Any surrounding buildings at risk?”

“There’s just one person inside, and it’s not close enough to the neighboring complexes to be an immediate danger,” Tsukauchi says, and Shouta feels himself start to relax, only to grimace when the detective continues with a pained voice. *“I got a text from the kid’s AI. That’s the only reason I was notified of this so quickly.”*

It’s almost funny how he immediately knows who he’s talking about. “Rabbit’s already on the scene? He should be resting right now, not—”

“Shouta, he’s the one in the building.”

Shouta’s heart seems to freeze in his chest, eyes bugging out while he nearly propels himself straight off the edge of the roof he’s on. It’s only by the grace of his capture weapon that he manages to right himself and make it to the next ledge, because *fuck,* Tsukauchi’s never called him by his first name before.

Fear, so cold and sharp and *blinding,* runs through his veins and leaves him trembling. “What?”

“We’re on a time limit. It was his AI who contacted me, not him, so he’s

most likely unconscious. You need to get there before the building collapses on top of him. I already called your agency's hospital; they have a bed waiting just in case."

Just in case. Just in case the boy is already dead. Just in case Shouta doesn't get there fast enough. *Fuck. Pull yourself together.*

"Got it. Anything else I need to know? I'll make sure to—" He cuts himself off with a noiseless gasp, mouth gaping open.

He's still about a mile away from City Hall, but Shouta can *see it.* The building itself is fairly huge, and even from this far away the orange and red flames that are spreading to the lower floors are still very prominent. It's a blazing inferno—a beacon of light against the dark sky. Shouta recognizes it as the apartment complex that closed down years ago around the time he graduated from UA. One of his mother's friends used to live there.

Shouta tries to push away the emotions threatening to boil over. *Why* is his student in an abandoned building at this time of night? And, more importantly, *how* did he get caught up in this supposed bombing?

A smaller, nastier voice at the back of Shouta's mind tells him that he *does* know, that he knows exactly how and why this situation is occurring. With everything he knows, it's not hard to take a guess. But that's something he can stress over later—he has a kid to save.

The hero is a blur of dark fabric when he shoots closer to the scene, Tsukauchi having already hung up. His heart is pounding out of his chest, his breaths shaky and uneven. The building right next to the one on fire only goes up to half its height, so Shouta will have to use his scarf to slingshot himself up to the top floor. It's easier to work his way down that way.

It's probable that the bomb was triggered at the very top, so Rabbit—no, *Midoriya* must be there. His student. His kid.

He has to go faster. He has to make sure he won't fail this time—

Shouta trips over something soft, and he lands on uneven ground, knees digging into harsh gravel. He curses at his clumsiness and moves to get up, as he can't afford to waste any more precious seconds, when he suddenly *sees* it.

A body, limp and unmoving, is crumpled up near the edge. Its torn

clothing is stained crimson, and Shouta nearly gags at the overwhelming stench of death that surrounds him on all sides. He throws a quick glance around, something heavy dropping into his stomach once he takes in the other dead figures spread out on the rooftop. The space is eerily silent with nothing but the cackle of flames in the distance.

He forces himself to his feet, leaving the bodies behind. He recognizes some of them by their pale, frozen looks as he passes, and a shudder runs through him.

Those haunted faces don't belong to just villains. There are heroes among them, Shouta can tell.

The closer he gets to the fire, the less the bodies appear. He can see more limp figures littered on the buildings surrounding the scene, leading Shouta to believe that someone (or some*thing)* must have stopped them from getting too close. The growing puddles of blood next to the bodies are fresh.

Horror settles under his skin, and he doesn't hesitate in sending his capture weapon wrapping around the railing of one of the upper balconies. *Midoriya, what have you gotten yourself into, kid?*

He yanks himself up the rest of the way, not sparing the heroes and police far down below a second glance. He doesn't have time to lay into them for being so fucking useless.

He crashes through a window, and okay, maybe there could've been a better way for him to enter, but he doesn't have much time to work with at the moment, so you can kindly screw off.

Shouta ducks his face into his scarf to avoid inhaling most of the smoke, and his eyes burn from the heat and intensity in the air. He has to make this quick, or else he'll have to be rescued, too. He stumbles around blindly, waving his hands to try and see past the dust and debris.

"Midoriya!" He shouts, praying he can be heard over the roaring of the flames. "Kid! Are you in here!"

He coughs, an acrid taste filling his mouth, and the distraction is almost enough to send him plummeting straight through the gaping hole in the middle of the floor. Shouta steadies himself and peers down the opening, calling out for the boy again. This part of the wood must've caved in due to too much pressure, resulting in a sort of

avalanche that stopped near the base level.

He could be buried under all that.

Shouta shakes himself and scans the different floors, or at least what he can see of them. The fire is close enough to bite at his back now, and Shouta moves closer to the edge. He has to be here, he has to be okay, he has to be *alive*—

His capture weapon shoots up and wraps around one of the strongest points in the ceiling the moment he catches a glimpse of dark green, and Shouta uses it to slide down to one of the lower levels.

He can't exactly drop like a rock unless he wants to risk sending the building into even more chaos. It could collapse any second—he has to go. *They* have to go.

Shouta feels suddenly light-headed when he comes to a stop right beside the mess of smoldering green hair. He lurches forward, boots splashing in the blood that sits in a puddle on the ground. Blood that should not be pooling out of his kid's body, he thinks. That's something he does know.

The spike is what gets his attention first, that and the large slab of concrete that pins Midoriya's legs to the floor. And his *face*...

There's soot and ash all over his student, combined with a multitude of gashes and cuts. His eyes are shut, and there's no sign of life other than the faintest rise and fall of his chest, though that could just be a trick of the hero's mind.

"Kid!" Shouta taps his cheek, doing it again with more force when he gets no response. His fingers find his way to the boy's neck, and he could probably collapse in relief once he feels the strong, steady pulse beneath the skin. *Not dead yet.*

It takes a good ten seconds for Shouta to move the concrete, his steel-enforced capture weapon doing most of the heavy-lifting. He's actually kind of glad Midoriya isn't awake right now to feel this, as he knows that would've hurt like a bitch.

But now for the hard part.

He crouches down and carefully slips an arm under the kid's back, the other under his knees. The spike shifts when Shouta lifts him up, and he winces in sympathy. *Please don't wake up now. Wait a little longer.*

In a more ideal circumstance, Shouta would be able to leave Midoriya where he is until on-site medical professionals could deal with the pipe lodged in him, but there's not much of a choice here. He can't take the piece out himself, obviously, so this is how it must be for now.

But even with the fairly large piece of shrapnel inside him, Midoriya doesn't weigh that much at all. For someone so powerful who maintains decent muscles, Shouta expected the kid to weigh more. And as he rushes them to the nearest balcony, planning to go out the same style he went in, Shouta can't help but wonder when the last time the boy ate a proper meal was.

A darker part of him would almost rather stay ignorant.

There's a high-pitched groan, and then the boards above them are breaking apart. Shouta can do nothing but tighten his grip on Midoriya as he jumps, the wind whipping at his face and cheek. The building is still roaring and cackling, and there's more crashes from inside, signaling more avalanches.

They land roughly on a neighboring building, this one free of any bodies, and Shouta forces himself to control his nerves. They made it out, but with Midoriya's condition there's no telling what's going to happen next.

Take him to your hospital. You know what you're doing. Calm down.

It's a good thing he got his student out, as the heroes seem to have called in more backup to help control and put out the fire. None of them, however, look the least bit concerned that there might have been someone in the building. They would've left him to *die.*

Shouta forces himself to run faster, glancing every now and then at Midoriya's face to see if there's any changes. His student doesn't stir, and he can't decide if that's good or bad.

He still hasn't managed to wrap his head around the situation, as just fifteen minutes ago he was doing his patrol like any other day, and now he's carrying a dying kid to the hospital, a ton of revelations coming to light.

"Christ, kid," he mutters, readjusting his grip when Midoriya's head falls into the crook of his neck. "You've got some explaining to do once we get out of this one."

It's a blessing that his agency's hospital is just around the corner, which is probably why Tsukauchi said he would already have everything prepared.

Shouta drops down to the sidewalk, ignoring the screams that come from the few civilians out at this time, instead kicking open the glass doors to the walk-in center. It's not the ER or hero section, but it'll have to do.

"Sir, visiting hours are—*oh, shit!"* A boy with cotton-candy hair begins, only to break off upon seeing what Shouta has in his arms. His hand slams something on the side of his desk, and the door to the back room immediately slides open.

Everything is a blur after that.

A team of doctors meet him halfway, all ones that Shouta is familiar with and could probably pick out by name, and then he's following close behind them after he places Midoriya on the rolling gurney.

"The pipe is deep—it could have hit close to his heart," he hears one of them say, and those words are all it takes to send Shouta down a spiral. "He needs it removed, *now.* Intake assessment first, as quickly as possible, then prep him for surgery."

Surgery. *Surgery.*

Someone ushers him back when he attempts to follow them, and he finds himself standing in the middle of the pristine, too-clean hallway with blood staining his dark clothes and hands, dripping rhythmically onto the floor. Antiseptic burns his nose, and he's brought out of his momentary daze when a nurse comes by with wet wipes to help him clean off.

Shouta can only nod in thanks when she leaves, semi-dry hands fumbling for the phone in his pocket. The first person he calls is Recovery Girl, but he's pleasantly surprised when Chiyo informs him that she's already on her way. Nezu apparently told her to pack her supplies and bring it over.

He makes a note to thank the principal for his creepy, all-knowing ways.

Shouta sits down in a chair directly adjacent to the wing they took Midoriya in, and then he calls Hizashi.

God knows he can't do this alone.

But after all that's said and done, when his husband has promised to be there in less than twenty minutes with an emergency overnight bag for him, Shouta has nothing else to do to pass the time.

So he thinks about every little thing that's led up to this event, and he waits.

When Izuku wakes up, it takes him a while to even notice it.

It's a funny thing, living after dying. Living after being so sure that the last thing he'd ever see would be the fiery embers of his father's hatred. But in the end he didn't die at all, though that's not how it feels.

He only realizes he's alive when his eyes blink open and focus on the people crowded around him. They're all in white and blue and black scrubs, and it takes Izuku a good ten seconds to process why that could be.

Oh. They're doctors. He counts the ones he can see and comes up with six. Or maybe it's seven. He doesn't know.

Another few seconds go by. They must've realized he's awake by now, since he can see their mouths moving but not emitting any sound. This is bad. He doesn't have a plan. He doesn't know what's happening, and he also doesn't know what the fuck is *going* to happen.

But that's not his problem. He's not going to stick around long enough to find out.

The memories hit him all at once, steeling his resolve, and then he moves.

Well, tries to. Izuku's entire body is numb, and he can't even move his own mouth to form words. He manages to tilt his head, and that's when he notices that he's been stripped down to his underwear, and that the pipe is *still in his fucking side.*

Are they trying to get it out? Is that what this is? A surgery? His stomach drops, and the world around him sharpens when a light shines in his eyes. They must've already taken his blood. They can see all of his scars, all of his wounds.

Which means they know. They know about Rabbit, they know about *everything.*

A fresh wave of panic hits him, and he starts struggling again. This time, he manages to move his arms and legs a little, lashing out with the faintest hint of One for All cackling across his skin. He can't come up with any more than that, though. It hurts to try.

"Hey, kid!"

"Son, stop moving."

A hand grabs his wrist and gently pins it to the table, and Izuku hates how hard it is just to break free from the doctor's grasp.

"Why isn't he still under? He shouldn't be awake!"

"He said he has a high metabolism, so keep pumping—!"

They're talking as if he's not there, and really, maybe he isn't. Not mentally, at least. He can still taste the ash in his mouth, still see the figure looming over the edge from high above. Still remember the anguish of not being able to find—

Liquid fire is injected into his bloodstream.

It hurts, *god* it hurts. It spreads from his arms to his neck and down to his toes. It's hot, it's *hot,* get it out of him, *please,* he's sorry, he said he was sorry, stop it, he won't ever do it again, he promises. Just get it out.

He tries not to break his promises. His father knows this. They should know this, and yet they're all just standing there while his entire body erupts into flames, the scorching heat peeling back his skin and taking knives to his flesh.

Wait. Please. Please. Please. Not this again. I was good.

Izuku thinks faintly, at the very back of his boiling mind, that if he goes unconscious one more time today, the void he ends up floating in will just stop taking him in altogether. He doesn't like that ocean of

nothingness, no. He's not a fan after being exposed to it all his life. A better alternative to that would be not waking up at all.

Death can't resent him forever. She can't keep giving him a taste of hell only to yank him back up when he learns to get comfortable in it.

He's getting too tired.

Toshinori is smart. He knows this. The world knows this. He wouldn't be the number one hero if he wasn't.

Being smart, however, is not the same as being intelligent. Because as of this moment, with Toshinori sitting on a small plastic chair in a hospital he's never been to before, staring at his sound-asleep successor as he tries to fight off his latest infection, the man has never felt more *dumb* in his life. And coming from a man who's tried to Detroit Smash an entire typhoon away, that's saying something.

A student who gets the correct answer on a test can be described as smart, but a student that solves the problem from a different perspective or by using other means and resources to do so can be described as intelligent.

At least, that's what Gran always used to say.

One isn't better than the other, of course, but the fact still remains that Toshinori doesn't fall into the intelligent category, or else he would've fucking *seen* the signs.

"Rabbit," he mutters, testing the name out on his tongue, wincing as he hears it echo in his ears.

He still doesn't quite believe it. The words that Nezu cheerfully threw at him over the phone don't make sense to him. They can't be true, can't be possible.

Midoriya Izuku, his boy, his *successor,* just can't be the snarky

vigilante that's been terrorizing Japan for upwards of a few years now. There's no way.

But even as he thinks this, Toshinori knows it's true. Not only is there solid proof in the form of whatever device was on the kid's forearm, but Aizawa himself even confirmed it. And as scary and questionable as his coworker can be sometimes, Toshinori still trusts his judgement wholeheartedly.

How the younger man figured it out in the first place is a mystery, though not one Toshinori is willing to ask him about.

But if he's being honest with himself, he doesn't care that Midoriya is a vigilante. He doesn't care that his successor has been breaking the law for so long that the *no vigilantism* clause has become more of a suggestion than anything set in stone. What really concerns Toshinori is everything else.

Midoriya is, for one, homeless. He doesn't live with his father like he told Toshinori, and nor does he just *forget* to eat sometimes in lieu of his busyness. The kid probably didn't even *have* any food to eat in the first place.

What this all means is that Midoriya *lied* to him. Straight to his face. On multiple occasions.

It hurts more than Toshinori is willing to admit.

The pieces have fallen into place. The more he thinks about it, the more obvious it becomes. The bags under the boy's eyes, the way he would limp or favor one side during training, even though Toshinori knew for a *damn* fact it wasn't because of their sparring matches. How light Midoriya is despite having pretty decent-sized muscles, and then there's the obvious skill he showed in hand-to-hand combat even on the first day they tried it together—it's all pointing to the idea that he's Rabbit, a homeless vigilante who has somehow managed to survive this long with the whole world against him whilst also going to a school for heroes.

It's so absurd to think about that Toshinori can't help but laugh, though it holds none of the usual warmth that always seems to come out when he's around the boy. He drops his head forward and rests a large palm on Midoriya's bandaged hand, wondering for the nth time since Nezu called him how things could've escalated this far. If Toshinori had known half of what he knows now, he wouldn't have let the boy out of his sight, and thus none of this would've happened.

He wonders what his mentor would think about all this, and he finds himself praying he hasn't disappointed her yet again. He wouldn't be able to take it.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He rumbles, more to himself than anything. He knows Midoriya probably can't hear him with the state he's in right now. "I would've helped you, my boy."

And it's the truth. Toshinori would've been upset, sure, but he never would have pushed him away. He'd never dream of it. Hell, harboring a wanted criminal and becoming an enemy to the government honestly wouldn't have been a big price to pay in exchange for Midoriya's safety and happiness.

He would've gone that far in a heartbeat, but now it seems that option has gone down the drain. And the uncertainty of what will happen next is almost unbearable.

"I wouldn't take it personally," Aizawa says, and Toshinori does *not* jump out of his skin and squawk at the sudden presence of his coworker in the decidedly not-empty-room, thank you very much. He flushes, wanting to ask just how long he's been leaning against that wall for, but the man continues before he can get a chance. "He's lied to just about everyone. For good reason, too."

Toshinori frowns, turning his attention back to the injured boy, gaze lingering on his wrapped chest and stomach—a result of *hours* of surgery and multiple healing heroes. "I fail to see how there can be any reason good enough to excuse *this."*

He gets a grunt, and then Aizawa is walking closer to peer at his student as well. "I hate to say it, but for once I agree with you."

Does he, though? Toshinori knows that the other hero doesn't express his emotions as clearly as most people do, but he still can't help but be baffled at how Aizawa is holding such a blank face at a time like this. He doesn't look like someone who carried a near-dead teenager out of a collapsing building just hours before.

Toshinori could be wrong, though, as he's obviously not nearly as good at reading people as he thought he was.

He rests his hand back on Midoriya's, pointedly ignoring Aizawa's unimpressed stare at the action. He knows the boy can't feel or even accept the comfort Toshinori is trying to give him, but it can't hurt to try. And besides, he's doing this for himself, too. He needs to *feel* that

his protégé is really here and alive, not just some figment of his imagination.

He clears his throat. “And what of his cat? Have we learned anything new?”

“They still haven’t found the person who dropped her off, but the vet made sure to save some of the blood found in her fur. They think it might belong to whoever did it.” Aizawa dips his face into his capture scarf and shoves his hands into his pockets. “I personally don’t think it’ll lead anywhere, but it’s not like there’s anything else they can go off of.”

Toshinori nods, satisfied with the answer. Missy was the second thing he asked about upon arriving at the hospital. He knows how much the cat means to Midoriya, so finding her and ensuring her health was at the top of his priority. Now, you can imagine everyone’s surprise after learning that a cat fitting Missy’s description was dropped off at a nearby Veterinarian’s office just an hour after Aizawa found Midoriya.

The secretary couldn’t catch a glimpse of who did it, having been too worried about the soot-covered feline in front of her. The cat wasn’t injured too badly, it seems. She had just a few scrapes and cuts from the initial explosion, so it didn’t take very long to heal her, but for now she's being kept at the Vet’s office until someone can pick her up.

Toshinori never thought he would be this relieved over an animal’s well-being before, and yet here he is. He’s begun to realize a lot of things about himself since Midoriya came along.

“The meeting at UA starts in an hour,” Aizawa states, eyes closed with his head thunking back against the wall, voice as monotone as always —though now Toshinori can detect something deeper in those words. He just can’t put his finger on it. “If you want to make it on time you should leave now. I’m sure you of all people want to be there to make sure nothing bad happens.”

Toshinori’s brows furrow, confusion lining his features. “You’re not going?”

Aizawa just snorts. “Someone has to watch the kid, All Might. You heard what he did during surgery, now imagine how much more panicked he’ll be once he wakes up, especially now that he’s restrained.”

Toshinori was so consumed in his thoughts earlier that he completely forgot about the thick black straps pinning the injured boy to the table. There's four of them—one that goes over his chest, one that rests over his hips, one for his knees, and another for his ankles. Toshinori was appalled when he busted through the doors and saw them, but no amount of demanding saw to the restraints being removed.

"It's cruel," he spits out, that earlier anger coming back tenfold. "Young Midoriya is not an animal that needs to be restrained. He's just going to struggle harder this time."

Aizawa lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "They've deemed him a flight risk, and with such a powerful quirk it's only protocol to strap him down to prevent him from hurting himself or others. But that doesn't make it right."

No. No it does not. The only thing Toshinori can say is at least the doctors compromised with them: if Midoriya shows signs of being less volatile and more compliant the next time he wakes up, the straps will be allowed to be removed. It sounds simple enough, but it's hard to predict what Midoriya will do next at this point. No doubt the boy is as lost and panicky as everyone else. He might lash out again.

The hero stands from the uncomfortable chair, his joints popping as he goes. His hand retracts, but he hesitates on moving further, not wanting to leave his successor but also not wanting to miss the very important meeting at UA that'll determine Midoriya's fate.

And it's not that he doesn't trust Aizawa to watch over him carefully, it's just that it's hard to trust anyone right now after all the information they've learned.

The underground hero must sense his gaze on him, as dark eyes flutter open and glitter in the hospital lights. "He'll be fine, All Might. You act like I'm going to kill him the moment he wakes up." He tilts his head in consideration, a wry grin appearing on his face. "Actually, with all the shit he's been hiding from us, that might save us all some trouble."

Toshinori balks, forcing himself to simply wave goodbye and take his leave after one last glance at his successor. He can only hope that last part was a joke, as it's hard to tell with Aizawa sometimes.

But it's too late to worry about that now. He has a meeting to attend.

Shouta waits in Midoriya's room for thirty minutes, just playing cat games on his phone and grading papers with the occasional call from Nemuri or Hizashi, before Chiyo texts him to come to her office. He immediately gets up and makes for the room three doors down the hallway, already knowing what this is about.

The surgery was a success overall, besides the whole *waking up in the middle of it* part, so Shouta isn't too worried about the damages that particular wound will leave Midoriya. His other injuries were taken care of after, so he's fine there as well. The boy just needs a few more healing sessions and he should be set to leave.

But that's not the major problem at hand. The problem is that Midoriya obviously has a ton of other issues that no one is really paying attention to. Issues that look to have been going on for awhile now, and yet haven't been talked about before now.

Chiyo said she'd do an extensive check-up over Midoriya, and when Shouta found out about it he'd asked if he could be there for the results. As the boy's homeroom teacher, Shouta thinks he has a right to know what the hell's wrong with him.

Which leads to now, with Chiyo shuffling papers and binders around to try and clean up her makeshift workspace. She sets a few more things aside before collapsing in a chair, clutching what looks to be the results of the tests in her hand.

Shouta gives her a few moments to recover, watching as she sits up a little straighter and smooths out the papers.

"You might as well sit down, this is going to be awhile."

Her voice is grim, and Shouta sinks into the plastic chair opposite of her. He can already tell this isn't going to be good.

"Midoriya has multiple health issues—all of which are being

supplemented by his quirk. Some completely, others partially.” At Shouta’s blank look, she continues. “When I say this, I mean that the only reason he appears healthy is because his quirk is ensuring that he is. However, as you can imagine, there are many problems that have arose because of this.” She takes in a deep breath, rubbing her forehead tiredly, air passing between her teeth.

Shouta is struck with sudden gratitude for the woman. She hasn’t gotten a break from using her quirk in days. Nezu called her here in the middle of the night without warning, and Shouta has yet to hear a single complaint from her. In fact, she seems more calm than anyone else would be in this situation.

"It is very subtle,” she notes, catching Shouta’s eye as if to make sure he understands. “I doubt many others would have noticed it if they weren’t specifically looking for it, but the boy also has a very high metabolism due to his enhancements, so he heals at a slightly faster rate than normal humans, though not quite fast enough to be considered a true regenerative aspect. At least, not one that he’d have to register for.”

He frowns, hunching forward in his chair. “So he can heal himself? To what extent?”

Chiyo shakes her head. “To say heal is to assume he gets fully recovered, which he doesn’t. You’ve seen the scarring on him, Shouta. His x-rays indicate multiple past fractures and breaks, most of which are from blunt force trauma, not necessarily continuous pressure. A majority of those breaks, it seems, healed incorrectly.”

Shouta crosses his arms, taking in her words like water. “Incorrectly,” he echoes drily. “I should’ve figured saying as he doesn’t like hospitals. I’m sure he thought he could tend to his injuries by himself.”

“That’s the way it looks as of right now. But the problem is his healing isn’t exactly some grand quirk—it is merely a result of a boosted metabolism, which means that although his body has its own way of stitching itself up, it doesn’t exhibit proper care or treatment needed to help him fully recover. Infections and diseases, for one thing, are still things he’s highly susceptible to. A high metabolism won’t exempt him from those threats.”

The hero looks troubled, and Shouta catches on quickly. “He’s healing in all the wrong ways,” he finishes. “So his quirk is basically putting a

bandage on a gunshot wound and calling it a fix."

"Unfortunately so. It works in the moment, and as long as the bandage is changed every so often normal functions will remain, but in the long run things will only prove to get worse."

It's not used to make sure he's safe, Shouta realizes with a start. *It's used to make sure he wins the battle in that moment.*

He curses, the weight of her words falling onto his shoulders like a boulder. "How do you fix it?" He asks, and he winces at his own desperation. "All of the stuff you said you found, I mean."

"We'd have to undo the healing that's already taken place, starting with re-breaking certain bones so I am able to fix them properly. Only then will his quirk factors be of use to him."

Fuck.

They sit like that in silence for a moment, Chiyo looking over the papers and Shouta running his hands through his hair—a nervous tic he *thought* he'd gotten rid off after high school, but it appears not.

He swallows past the lump in his throat. "What else is wrong with him? It can't be just that."

"I'll start with the health issues his quirk does not fully supplement, or the ones that are too severe for it to correct. The most basic one would be bad quirk control. His enhancements are maintaining Midoriya's body in such a way that it causes an imbalance in his nervous system, making the control over his own strength very difficult. It seems he also has vast reserves of power which only amplifies this difficulty."

Shouta grinds his teeth in mild frustration. There were so many signs pointing to the truth, and yet he still missed them all. It was only a few weeks ago that he managed to put some of the pieces together, which is completely unacceptable. *Too late. Far too late. I could've prevented this if I had just looked a little deeper.*

"That's not the worst of it, I'm afraid." Her voice brings Shouta out of his thoughts. "He also has some trauma on his growth plates which has me concerned. This is directly involved with his own bodily health. His malnutrition and lack of sleep is making his body frail, thus making his cells work twice as hard for only a fraction of the usual outcome."

For a second, Shouta thinks he's misheard her. "Malnutrition?"

"Don't act so surprised!" Chiyo exclaims, giving the younger hero a sharp look. "The boy looks dead on his feet, Shouta, and I *know* you've noticed how small he is. His sugar levels are way below average, and it looks like he hasn't had a proper meal in months. It's an easy enough fix, though, and if addressed soon won't be a problem in the future."

She looks up at Shouta, giving him a moment to grasp what she's saying and to interject or ask questions if he chooses to. He stays silent, his mind drifting to the meeting he knows his husband is at right now. He knows one of them had to be there, so he's not complaining, but at the same time he can't help but wish Hizashi could be here beside him.

"One thing I need you to note," Chiyo says slowly, her serious gaze grabbing hold of Shouta's and not letting go, "is that this malnutrition doesn't seem to be a new thing. His body is used to this, almost. The trauma on his growth plates, as I mentioned, extends back several years." She shakes her head. "Which might be why he's so small, you know. Everything else about his body points to the idea that he should have grown a little by now, but he hasn't. He's almost unnaturally short for a boy his age. And, taking into account his muscle mass and BMI, underweight. Do you catch my drift?"

It extends back *years.* Meaning this has to have been going on for longer than Midoriya has been homeless. He wasn't eating correctly when he *was* with his guardian, and nor was he being treated right.

Neglect?

Yes. Shouta understands what she's saying very well.

Chiyo turns her eyes to the paper once again. "The last is his body's dependency on his quirk for maintaining his health. His enhancements are making up for a deficit in nearly every necessary thing, from calcium to Vitamins A, D, and C. It's extensive. Like I said before, this also goes into his eating and sleeping habits. He might not actually *feel* like he's hungry or tired, so it may be more difficult to notice how destructive he's being to himself. That's also an easy enough fix, but I do expect some trouble."

"I'll take care of it," Shouta interrupts, nodding. *I can make him eat and sleep, at least.*

“And I’ll hold you to that,” she threatens, pointing her cane at him. “This could work out better than expected, but even so, there’s always a chance things could go downhill straight after this. What I can do is give you basic dietary and nutritional supplements to help his body start maintaining itself once he’s discharged.”

“Okay,” Shouta breathes, looking out the window briefly before letting his eyes close. “That’s not too bad.”

“It will take a while, and it will be difficult. The poor boy’s entire body will be thrown out of whack, and no doubt he will become sick, frail, and weak during the time his body takes to adjust. His hormones will be imbalanced for a while, but at the end of it he will ultimately be healthier. And not to mention perhaps have better quirk control.”

Chiyo had held Shouta’s gaze during her explanation and now sits waiting for him to respond, though she’s not rushing him at all. They both know it’s a lot to take in.

The silence stretches on and her eyes gain a dark light of understanding. “It wouldn’t be the worst a hero has lived with, though, and it won’t be the worst to come. He’s just going to need a lot of support.”

Support, huh? Midoriya’s parents are out of the question. That doesn’t leave many other choices.

Chiyo stands, folding the paper and moving back to her desk. “You’re not obligated to do anything, Shouta. He’s alive and functioning well enough at the level he is at—for now, at least.”

She opens a drawer, and Shouta follows her movements with his eyes.

“If there is one thing we know as heroes, it is that life is suffering. We live as tools for a greater good, nothing more, nothing less. But, if you do intend to be there for him,” she pauses, turning to Shouta with a paper labeled *Dietary Plans* in hand, gaze heavy as it lands on him. “You must commit to it. You make your choice and that’s that; don’t give false hope and don’t build something you plan on destroying. It’s far crueler than continuing to stand by as you have been doing.”

She passes him the document, eyes softening. Shouta doesn’t know quite when it got so suffocating in here. His throat feels tight all of a sudden.

“He’s a good kid, and he’ll be an even greater hero,” she says, like it’s

an undisputed fact, “he just needs someone to guide him back to the light.”

He clutches the paper tighter and watches the woman leave with his mind reeling.

It won’t be until later that he realizes he never asked her about the boy’s blood results.

Chapter End Notes

> foolish child. thinking the Stain of your sins could be washed away by your heroics.
>
> the beginning of this chapter was inspired by this song on youtube I feel like the sirens/static is what Izuku was subconsciously hearing after passing out.
>
> o

complicity

Chapter Notes

me? late? more likely than you think

(warning: mentions of/references to child abuse; also slight manga spoiler—from yamada and aizawa's backstory)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Visiting the children in nearby orphanages used to be one of Hizashi's favorite things to do when he had time off.

Between being a teacher, a radio show host, and a pro hero, he doesn't get much time to himself. But even with the insane hours he works and the patrols he occasionally takes during the weekends, he always makes sure to have a little time left over for the little ones in the orphanages.

Hizashi loves children. He's always had a soft spot for them, and he likes to think he's a pretty likable figure among them. Children seem to like his upbeat personality and voice, and they don't cower away or cry when they see him, which is honestly more than he ever hoped for when he first graduated high school. Even most adults don't care for his loud voice, so it certainly came as a surprise to him when he made his hero debut.

Kids are just so sweet and kind and lovable that *god,* once upon a time Hizashi had wanted to adopt one.

He still does, in all honestly (he doesn't think that part of himself will ever fully go away), but that naïve wish of his has long since been stamped out. Hizashi remembers how he would have dreams of raising a kid with Shouta; wonderful dreams that would fill him with longing and a touch of sadness, because Shouta made it very clear that he didn't want any children.

It's too dangerous, Hizashi remembers his husband saying to him one night after he finally built up the courage to tell him about his dreams. About his thoughts on the future—on their future.

And it is dangerous, really. Hizashi isn't stupid. He knows that with their line of work, having a baby—whether or not it's biologically theirs—would create a weakness; it would paint a huge red target on

the listener's back. Most villains won't hesitate to hurt a child if it means getting back at the heroes who've wronged them. It's only logical, as Shouta would say.

But even with that knowledge weighing heavy at the back of his mind, Hizashi never stopped visiting the orphanages. He never stopped wanting. He would bring it up every now and then just to see his husband's reaction, because Hizashi knows Shouta wasn't entirely truthful that night. He knows his best friend like he knows the back of his own hand, like he knows the alphabet—forwards, backwards, in his sleep, and in another language. Shouta wants a child, too, and it's rather obvious. At least to the ones close to him.

Shouta, contrary to popular belief, doesn't hate children. He wouldn't be a teacher otherwise, that's for sure. He truly cares for his students, more so than most teachers in his position. That's something else that Hizashi and Shouta share: this want—no, *need* to have someone to bring into their relatively small and tight-knit family. This need to have someone to raise as their own.

Bonding with the kids at the homes served as a repeating source of comfort for Hizashi since the gap of years between Oboro's death and his marriage with Shouta—that stretch of time where the tide of grief was strong and any glimmers of happiness were revered like gold dust, and Hizashi and Shouta would cling to each other in hopes of riding out the never-ending waves of pain.

But the little tradition of going to visit the kids stopped shortly after meeting Midoriya for the second time. Hizashi remembers it with striking clarity, how he walked into that laundromat half-asleep, a clothes basket tucked under his arm with his mind flashing back to the celebrity interview he just finished up a few hours before, and promptly stumbled upon the same kid he'd witnessed being bullied not too long before.

We're just playing a game, one of the little gremlins said, obviously lying their ass off in hopes of not getting lectured. A game is only a game when all participants are enjoying themselves, and it's obvious Midoriya wasn't enjoying himself at all.

But back to the point.

Hizashi doesn't know why he stopped visiting the children as often as he used to. It just sort of happened. Maybe he just lost his drive, his passion. After so long of just waiting and wishing, he burnt himself

out.

He wanted to cut things off before he hurt himself even more with the idea of what could never be.

Or perhaps, some faraway part of him whispers, as if afraid of being even remotely correct, that drive was directed somewhere else.

It's been fifteen minutes since the meeting started and Hizashi hasn't talked much at all. He's opted to sit back in his worn rolling chair and spin around as he listens to Midoriya's other teachers ask varying questions, uncharacteristically quiet.

This is a lot to take in for everyone here. Learning that one of the most wanted vigilantes in Japan is actually a teenage boy is one thing, but learning that said vigilante attends a school full of pro heroes and *wasn't caught* is another. Hizashi chances a glance around, hiding a small smirk at how utterly baffled his coworkers look. Is it really this surprising? Midoriya has shown to be far more skilled than any other average first-year, so connecting him with Rabbit (someone who has already been rumored to be very young) can't be that much of a stretch.

Principal Nezu obviously doesn't think so. The albino stoat looks absolutely delighted at these turn of events, being the sadist he is. Hizashi wouldn't be surprised if the mammal already knew about Midoriya's situation before all of this went down. His boss is scary like that. Too smart for his own good, that's for sure.

The teachers have already been given the rundown of what happened —well, at least the version of it that'll protect Shouta and Tsukauchi from getting charged for aiding a criminal. The story Nezu fed the others is technically the truth, it's just lacking a bit of details: Rabbit got seriously injured after a series of explosions, and Shouta had coincidentally found him in that building during his patrol and taken him to the hospital. Upon unmasking the vigilante and finding out his identity, he alerted Nezu to the situation, leading them all to where they are now.

Hizashi knows the real story, obviously, so he doesn't really have to be here. But this meeting is important, so of course Hizashi's going to make sure he's present. What happens here is going to decide the little listener's future.

He's spacing out again, isn't he? That's not really the best thing to do at the moment. He has to pay attention to what's being said. Despite

his efforts, though, his mind chooses to focus on how he *royally* fucked up.

Hizashi should've known. He's been around Midoriya for quite some time now. He knew something was wrong; hell, the listener practically begged him to not walk him home that time, which is so screwed up that Hizashi immediately went home to share his worries with Shouta. All those times he met up with Midoriya at the laundromat, all those lies about his father being on a business trip—it's all playing on loop now, almost like a steady stream in his head. He thinks about how he'd joke around with Midoriya in English sometimes instead of doing his actual teacher work, and he thinks about how happy the boy seemed in those moments. Carefree, giddy, and even somewhat confident as he spoke in a foreign tongue with ease.

And then he tries to imagine that same boy caught up in the middle of a targeted villain attack, unable to do anything but wait in a burning building for help that he didn't even know would arrive or not.

It's not a pleasant thought.

"What's going to happen next?" Kan asks, arms folded over his chest. Why he's here is beyond Hizashi, but whatever. The only other heroes present are Midoriya's direct teachers, and honestly it should've stayed like that. This is a need-to-know basis; only the most trusted should be hearing this. "The kid's a criminal, right? After he's cleared, he'll be headed straight to jail. Maybe even prison."

Hizashi shifts, and he spots All Might jerk in his seat, as if about to cut in, but Nezu beats him to it.

"In ordinary circumstances, yes. Midoriya would indeed be handed over to the police for a full investigation and interrogation, but the fact of the matter is that this case is far from ordinary. Midoriya is, first and foremost, a child." He holds up a paw to stop Kan from interrupting. "He may be a vigilante, but that doesn't mean he is a criminal. Nor is he a villain."

Damn right, Hizashi thinks sourly. *Can't we just kick Vlad outta this meeting? This would go by much faster.*

"Reporting Midoriya to the police would be, ah, c*ounterproductive,* if you will."

All of the occupants in the room shudder at the principal's words, and Kan wrinkles his nose. "So, what? We just let this go and pretend

this never happened?"

Huh. It's almost like he *wants* the listener to go to prison.

"Why not?" Nemuri counters, ever the saving grace. Her voice is sultry, and she leans back in the chair to put her hands at the back of her head. "It oughta keep things a little more interesting around here, don't you think?"

"I assure you that this won't be swept completely under the rug," Nezu soothes, not breaking away from Kan's accusing stare. "We will handle this matter accordingly, as being a vigilante is, as you pointed out, illegal. Regardless of what his intentions were, Midoriya is still very much in the wrong. As a consequence, Rabbit will no longer be active after this meeting, at least for the time being."

Snipe clears his throat, cutting across Kan's outraged echo of *for the time being?* "His intentions? And what're those?"

Hizashi perks up, ready to jump in and defend the boy if need be, but it seems Nezu has it covered.

"As of this moment, his motives for being a vigilante are unclear, though I do suspect we will get some satisfactory answers soon. I'm sure Midoriya will eventually agree to an interrogation by one of our trusted detectives, and only then can we—"

"An interrogation?" All Might interrupts, speaking for the first time since Nezu's explanation to the others. "I don't think that will be necessary! I mean, Young Midoriya is definitely in quite the rough spot, no denying that! But isn't an interrogation too harsh?"

"He's a criminal," Kan reminds again, being ultimately ignored by the others in the room.

Ishiyama hums, considering All Might's words. "It does seem a little cruel. The boy's entire building went up in flames, right? He's no doubt traumatized."

Yamada watches everyone's reactions when Nezu dutifully answers the cement hero's question.

"As I'm sure many of you have already guessed, Midoriya has been homeless for quite a few years now." The temperature in the room seems to drop a couple thousand degrees, and the albino stoat continues, as if unaware of the rising tension. "Rabbit lived in that

abandoned building during most of his time as a vigilante, so it most definitely became a sort of safe space for him."

"And now that's all gone," Ectoplasm finishes for him, shaking his head.

If only he went to someone. We were all right here for him. Did he not realize that?

Nezu looks pained at the response. "Unfortunately so. I was quite upset myself when I first received the news. This is all quite devastating for the poor boy." He moves around a stack of papers in front of him, seeming to search for something. "I looked through his records not too long ago to see what I could find that could possibly be of use for this situation, and it appears that the only guardian he has listed on all of his legal paperwork does not, in fact, exist. I haven't been able to get ahold of him. After doing some more research, I've concluded that Midoriya doesn't appear to have any family left at all—at least, not any that he considers as such."

Hizashi's throat constricts at the admission, and he sees the other teachers in the room straighten up, obviously not expecting that. All Might looks to be having a series of important and earth-shattering revelations.

"I'm afraid that even as head of UA, I will not be able to do much for Midoriya *legally* speaking if things do not work out as well as we all wish. Unless I can find a suitable placement for the boy, I will be forced to release him to the proper authorities, who will then put him in the system."

Shit. Just as Hizashi thought. This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

All Might is the first to react, his voice pleading. "Foster care, sir? Isn't there another way? If he's put in the system he might be forced to drop out of UA! And then how can we even hope to protect him from —?"

"I'm all too aware of this possibility," Principal Nezu says calmly, pressing his paws together as he lets his gaze travel to each and every hero present at the table. "Which is why foster care will remain as a last resort only. As of right now, I have one other option that will ensure of Midoriya's enrollment here. However, I will need a definite answer from one of you before this meeting is to conclude."

Oh. *Oh.* Hizashi knows where this is going.

He watches with his mouth slightly agape as the mammal slides out another packet of papers from the stack, and even from the opposite side of the table Hizashi can clearly see what the papers are for.

“While we can keep the true identity of Rabbit a secret from the world, both for his and *our* safety, we cannot hide the truth about Midoriya’s living situation. Which is why I’m suggesting that one of you eventually take over legal guardianship of the boy after UA gains custody of him.”

The sudden silence is almost deafening. Hizashi had expected something like this to happen, but to actually hear it *aloud?* It doesn’t feel real. Like this is all some sort of sick joke.

“You want us to babysit?” Kan asks gruffly, sounding annoyed by the mere thought of it.

Nezu smiles. “In essence, yes. Though I also ask that you work to keep Midoriya in check, as I’m sure these recent events will give way to less than pleasant reactions. He is, again, a vigilante who is currently being hunted by a group of very persistent people, so it is imperative that we do everything we can to help him. Even if he doesn’t see it that way, and even if it’s not exactly *legal.”*

At the mention of the attackers, Hizashi shivers. Shouta texted him briefly about the bodies he’d stumbled across while trying to save the kid—the heroes and villains alike scattered like dead flies on the bloodstained rooftops. *That* doesn’t feel real either, though Hizashi knows it must’ve been horrifying to see.

The voice hero must’ve spaced out again, because when he shakes himself out of those unpleasant thoughts, All Might is lifting his chin determinedly.

“I can take him in!” He says, and all of the jaws in the room collectively drop in unison.

Now, Hizashi knows that All Might favors Midoriya out of all the other students. It doesn’t take a genius to realize that. But this is still unexpected. He’s the *number one hero,* and he’s offering to house a whole kid like it’s *nothing.*

Nezu ponders this for a moment, resting his chin on a paw. “I have no doubt that you would do right by him, All Might, but I do not think that would be the best course of action at this time.” He continues before the the blond can defend himself. “You’re a very well-known

figure, so if the media ever got a hold of that information, it would be the end of everything. Publicity is exactly what we don't want here."

"But I would be better—!"

Hizashi tunes out the rest of the counter argument, channeling his inner Shouta. This is getting to be pointless. While All Might definitely has passion for the cause, it's just unrealistic. Midoriya would arguably be in *more* danger with him as a caretaker. But at the same time, no one else here seems willing to open up their home to him. The listener will be forced to go into foster care if Nezu doesn't allow All Might to take him in.

There's a voice in Hizashi's head now. One that he repressed a long time ago, right after Shouta told him those words: *It's too dangerous.*

That voice is back now, and it's telling him that maybe, *maybe* that old dream wasn't as farfetched as it seemed. That maybe some things were just meant to be waited for.

Because this just feels *right.*

When Hizashi raises his hand and drags his gaze up from the table he's been drilling holes into with his eyes, he realizes Nezu is staring at him. Has been for a good few seconds. The mammal was waiting for his response. He had *expected* for him to say something.

Great.

Yamada Hizashi is simple, after all, and he knows it. But this doesn't mean he regrets it when he clears his throat and offers to house the wayward vigilante with his husband.

He'd never regret doing something like that.

The next time Izuku wakes, it's much quicker than before. It's almost sudden how it happens.

His eyes snap open, and he blinks into awareness. The smell that all hospitals share hits his nose, and his heart skips a beat. He's still here. He's still in danger.

Why wouldn't you be? His mind hisses at him. *It's not like you magically got out of here by yourself while unconscious.*

And that rude voice is right. His memory of the surgery is coming back slowly, but what he *does* know for certain is that *he can't stay here.*

His body is still numb, but not nearly as much as it was last time. He flexes his fingers just to prove this point, readying himself.

This is a different room than before, he can tell just by the ceiling. That's difference number one. The second difference is that there aren't any doctors hovering over him, poised and ready to strike.

Which means Izuku has been taken somewhere else. A secondary location.

No one survives the secondary location, he thinks, panic now gripping him in icy claws.

Yeah, he has to leave. Preferably now.

When he jerks up this time, it's not hands that hold him back, but rather large straps that go across his chest and hips, and the pain that shoots through his torso at the action has him crying out. He kicks his legs, only to realize that they're strapped down, too. So are his arms.

Oh, god.

One for All won't come to him. His quirks feel fuzzy, and even as he begs his mind to fucking cooperate and just *do* what it's supposed to do, to do what it *always* does even when he doesn't want it, Izuku finds himself stuck. He thrashes, breaths coming out in ragged gasps now.

Did they take them? His quirks? No, that's not possible. This can't be his father's doing. This—this has to be something else. If they were gone, Izuku would be left feeling empty. He'd know it, even while being this numb. Instead of that, though, the boy feels *distant.*

They're all there, he can feel it. But they still won't *come to him.*

Which means he's trapped.

The straps are thick. Even with his wild thrashing, they won't budge. Fuck, these must be *All Might* level restraints. Izuku may not be huge and burly, but he's still pretty strong without his enhancements. So for them to not even move an inch when Izuku is trying his best to dislodge them? It's scary.

Izuku throws his head back, hitting the hard pillow beneath him with a thump. He repeats the motion multiple times and squeezes his eyes shut, trying to conjure up everything he can, because *fuck* he can barely *breathe.* His throat feels tight, and the black straps dig into his bandaged skin every time he bucks up, chest heaving.

He needs to get out *now,* or else he'll forget how he even got in.

"Hey!"

Stars dance behind his eyelids, and he shakes his head fervently to get them away, not wanting to listen to whatever voice is teasing him. His head hits the pillow again, this time eliciting a dull burn at the base of his spine. Good. If he can just focus on that, maybe he can gain back the control on his quirks—

"Midoriya!"

—and get out of here. He's gone too far to stop now. He still needs to leave this country. He needs to find Missy and say goodbye to Kacchan and Ms. Hanako—

Large hands grasp his shoulders, shaking him violently, and it's like he's being thrust face-first out of cold water. His eyes fly open, meeting shining black ones, and his thrashing comes to an abrupt halt. Something feels *off.*

"Kid, I need you to calm down."

And that. That sounds like...?

Another shake of his shoulders, this time much gentler, and Izuku blinks up at Eraserhead's piercing gaze. *Why is he here? Does he know about—?*

"Hey," Aizawa says sharply, tearing the boy's attention back to him instantly. "Whatever you're thinking about, stop it. You're alright."

You're alright. He says it curtly, as if it's nothing more than the truth, and Izuku wants to believe him. He truly, *truly* wants to believe him. But his hands are still shaking and his limbs are still twitching under the restraints binding him to the bed, and it's harder than it should be to just *trust.* It's alright, he said, so it has to be true. Aizawa's never lied to him, at least not about things like this.

But that was before. Now is different.

Despite every bone in Izuku's body screaming at him to keep struggling, to keep fighting until he can find an opening, he forces his breathing to slow down until it's back to its normal rate, and he finds himself staring back up at the pristine white ceiling. He has to relax. If he doesn't, he might make them angry.

Who's them? His brain asks, and for once Izuku doesn't answer.

A finger pokes him in the forehead, and the boy realizes with a start that Aizawa is back to leaning over him, face pulled into a tight frown as he searches his expression. "Are you back?"

Izuku never really left, but instead of voicing this he just nods, still confused. There are so many questions on his tongue but not nearly enough energy to voice them.

Aizawa is here. That means he's okay, right? Or that he's in serious trouble. Both are entirely possible.

"Your cat is safe," the man says suddenly, backing away a few steps to give him space. Izuku's head snaps up, mind short circuiting, and Aizawa continues smoothly. "Someone dropped her off at a nearby vet's office around the same time I found you."

Izuku could almost cry at the revelation, but he's long since lost that mental capability, so he doesn't. He never cries, and he certainly isn't going to start now in front of his teacher. If what he's saying is true, Missy is *alive.* She's not dead because of Izuku's own poor, selfish decisions. She's not buried somewhere in a pile of ash—

I found you.

What does that mean? Is he the one who brought Izuku here? His memories are still hazy, and he can't remember a damn thing after passing out. God, how long has he been asleep? A day? Maybe more?

It's still dark outside, so it's hard to guess.

“Where—?” His voice comes out scratchy and raw. Izuku clears his throat. Tries again. “Where am I?”

Aizawa is still examining him, those keen dark eyes never leaving his face. “You’re at my agency’s hospital, kid. I found you at the scene of the fire and brought you here because of your injuries. You should understand that I didn’t have a choice.”

It’s said slow, as if he’s trying not to set Izuku off with the words, but if anything that makes him more upset. He doesn’t blame Aizawa for that. It’s just protocol. But what he wants to know is *why* the hero was there in the first place. His building is far from his patrol routes.

Izuku’s face twists with confusion as he frowns, the movement causing the raw skin on his jaw to pull taut. The prickling it rewards him with serves as a nice distraction. A nice focal point.

But then the hero is moving, stooping low to mess with what sounds like clamps on the underside of the bed. A moment later, the restraints loosen significantly, and the weight on Izuku’s chest is lifted. He doesn’t waste time in shrugging off the straps, that frantic need for freedom coming back in parts. He sits up a little too aggressively to take off the ones on his legs, having to choke down a hiss at the stab of pain in his torso.

“Easy,” Aizawa warns, ignoring the boy’s frantic *thank you’s* as he removes the tight strap going across his ankles. “You’re still recovering from your infection.”

Oh, Izuku guesses that makes sense. His head feels like it’s on *fire* right now. The IV taped to his elbow and the heart monitor set up on the side should’ve clued him in that he wasn’t healed all the way.

The hero sinks into the chair next to the bed, rubbing a hand down his face and looking way too tired to be dealing with the absolute bullshit being thrown at him right now.

This is when Izuku finally gets a good look at him. He’s not dressed in his hero clothes like he would usually be, but rather he’s wearing a normal maroon shirt with black sweatpants, and his hair is pulled back into a loose bun. A much larger yellow sweater is draped over the chair, and he assumes it must belong to the man as well. The change of appearance gives Izuku whiplash, and the boy feels guilt bloom in his chest.

He looks like he hasn’t slept. Has he been there all this time? At least

enough time to need a change of clothes?

After a few moments of silence, Aizawa lets out a short sigh, crossing his arms. “I know.”

I know. Aizawa figured out Rabbit’s true identity a few weeks prior to this, so that’s obviously not what he’s referring to. Now, Izuku might have been more lost had there been more to hide.

His breath is shaky as he whispers a quiet *oh.*

Aizawa stares at him, eyes trailing from his head to his bandaged torso and then back again. The seconds tick by *oh* so slowly, and Izuku grips the sheets so tightly beneath him that his knuckles turn white long before the man speaks.

“I’m not sure if you remember, but you woke up during the surgery. They had to put you under again, and during that time they were forced to take off anything they deemed a danger to their work. That includes this.”

He leans down a little and picks up the small bag sitting near his feet, setting it on the edge of the bed. Izuku doesn’t have to look to know what’s inside, and yet Aizawa reaches into it and pulls out the ring anyway.

Izuku isn’t surprised in the slightest. He felt the absence of it immediately after waking up. His senses are dulled now because of whatever drug they have him on. And *boy* whatever drug that is must be expensive as hell, because Izuku has never felt so numb in his *life.*

There’s no blood sitting at the back of his throat. There’s no buzzing in his mind and no quirk-related pains stabbing him in the temples. All Izuku knows is that this medicine probably costs more than his entire life, and that’s understandable.

The effects are temporary, obviously, but still. If Izuku had access to this, he wouldn’t need those pills anymore. The only downside is that he’d be technically high all the time, which, now that he thinks about it, doesn’t sound so bad. He’s tempted, actually.

It can’t be that hard to steal whatever this is in his veins and—

“Midoriya.”

He winces, not liking the sound of his name in that voice at all.

There's a flicker of something in Aizawa's eyes. Something stern, but —but almost protective. Izuku looks down at his hands, suddenly very interested in the fabric he's messing with to the point where it's almost tearing.

Aizawa leans to press the ring into Izuku's palm and sets the bag back down on the floor. The boy can catch a glimpse of the shattered remains of AINA in there, and also of one of his Rabbit knives.

Dammit. Missy was spared, thankfully, but of course AINA had to go.

"How long?"

Izuku purses his lips. "How long have I been Rabbit?"

The man jolts a little. "No, kid, that doesn't matter right now. How long have you been homeless?"

Izuku stays silent, unsure of what to say. He has a feeling that no answer of his will satisfy Aizawa. He has that familiar urge to lie, almost ashamed at his own vulnerability and the realization he has that he's just one major fuck up. Everything in his life has just been upended in the past however many hours, and he doesn't know what to do, dammit. He doesn't know what's going to happen, and he also doesn't know why Aizawa is being so fucking *gentle* about this.

Why isn't he more upset? Why isn't he more *angry?*

His teacher repeats himself, slower this time, and Izuku winces as his fingers tear the first hole through the poor hospital sheet. He forces himself to stop fiddling with it, instead bringing up a palm to wipe at his bandaged cheek.

He already knows almost everything. There's no point in lying now.

"Just a few years, sir."

The honorific slips out on instinct, surprising both of them. He hasn't called Aizawa that as Rabbit in a long time. But then again, he's not really Rabbit right now, huh? He's not quite *just Midoriya,* either.

He's some god-awful, in-between thing, isn't he?

"Just a few—?" Aizawa cuts himself off abruptly. Izuku watches his teacher swipe a hand down his face for the second time in as many minutes and let out a huff of barely contained frustration. "Midoriya."

The boy grits his teeth at the name, at the disbelieving way the man says it. Is he disappointed? Or is he finally pissed? Izuku would prefer the last one.

“Where have you been staying? Have you been on the streets?”

Yesn’t, is his first response, but Izuku quickly thinks against that. Now isn’t the time to joke. He has to focus. He has to be in control right now. Aizawa knows he’s Rabbit, that much isn’t new, but now he knows that he’s homeless. He has to be ready to run. There’s no telling who Aizawa’s told.

But don’t you trust him?

Aizawa shifts in the chair, face twitching in what Izuku thinks briefly is impatience. Oh. He’s left him waiting for too long.

“That is—*was* my home. I know it looks bad now, but I managed with it.” Izuku smiles weakly, aiming for a laugh, a huff, anything that’ll wipe that look off his teacher’s face. “So technically, I’m not homeless. That *was* my home.”

Well, if he wasn’t before he definitely is now. But that’s beside the point.

Aizawa shoots him an unamused look before letting out another sigh. Izuku is starting to think that that’s his name given how often people do that around him nowadays. Wouldn’t that be funny? Instead of calling him by a name people would just sigh really loudly in his direction and he’d respond like normal.

“Do you know who did this? Who set the trap?”

“Trap?” Izuku lifts a shoulder, deflection on his mind. “I wouldn’t call it a trap, really. Barbecue gone wrong, more like. Karma for all those times I set fire to those poor villain bases, maybe.”

“Kid, please.”

The sheer exhaustion in Aizawa’s voice is what breaks the last of Izuku’s resistance. He mumbles an apology and forces the next words out of his mouth, even as they scrape and tear at his throat. “I’ve, uh, had eyes following me home ever since the USJ. It might’ve been them, I think? I’m not too sure.”

There’s a sudden, heavy silence, and when Izuku looks up, Aizawa is

staring down at him with angry disbelief. And Izuku swears, he *swears* he sees a glimmer of hurt in those dark eyes, but he's still feeling pretty numb all over, and his brain feels more like static now, so honestly he could've just as easily imagined it.

"You noticed people tailing you for weeks before this, and you didn't think to come to someone about it? You didn't think to come to *me?"*

There's something about the way Aizawa's voice turns on the word *me* that has Izuku's gut churning painfully.

"You should have told me about your homelessness months ago. This should have been on your forms. You—" Aizawa's hand cuts through the air, and he takes a second to regain his composure. "You should have told me the first night we met when I caught you and brought you to Tsukauchi."

Izuku can't bring himself to meet his teacher's burning gaze, afraid of what he might find there. He settles on staring at the man's hands, at the way they tremble slightly when he moves them, at the way the hospital lighting makes the callouses on his palms look shiny. His words aren't quite an accusation, but Izuku knows he's expecting an explanation anyway.

"I thought if I told the truth, I'd be put in the system," he starts carefully, voice just above a whisper. "They'd take me away from everyone I know, and I wouldn't be close to—"

He pauses suddenly, but Aizawa seems to catch on rather quickly. "To UA. You didn't want to be away from UA or else you'd lose your chance at attending."

In all honesty, he's not wrong, though he's not completely right, either. UA is a school for heroes. All Might went there, and so did most of the other top ten heroes. It's a prestigious school that's guarded closely by its alumni, so to Izuku it's just as much a deterrent as it is a magnet.

It's an oxymoron in itself, just as hero society is, and All for One *hates it.*

Even though Izuku had no plans on going to this school—had no plans on being anything but Rabbit, to be frank—he still stayed closed to it. For comfort, maybe. To know that he always had that option.

No matter how fucked up or irrational it was, UA meant safety to

Izuku long before he even started attending it.

“So you just dropped off the grid, under the pretense of living with one of your parents?” Aizawa prompts, realizing he wouldn’t get another answer from him for that topic.

“I retracted my real father’s legal authority over me,” Izuku says softly. “So technically, I’m a runaway orphan. Nobody ever knew when they checked my files because I made sure to cover it up. Besides, it’s not like he was looking for me.”

It’s not like All for One cared enough to come out of the shadows and bring him back. He likes to bide his time.

Aizawa blinks. “You tampered with government records to make sure you’d stay out of the system?” A pause, and then— “That’s why you were reluctant at first to participate in the Sports Festival. You didn’t want to be recognized.”

Close, but not quite. Izuku can’t do shit about his father knowing he attends UA. But what he can do is call him out on live TV and lead him on a wild goose chase across the globe. Which reminds Izuku that he can’t be here right now. He should be halfway across the *world* at this point, initiating said goose chase

He nods awkwardly, letting his mop of uneven and partially burnt green hair obscure Aizawa from view. For a moment, there is pure silence, the only sound being the dull ambiance from outside the door. He wonders what will happen now. If he’ll be dropped into the foster care system, or expelled from school, or dropped from the hero course.

Tartarus is another likely option.

Panic leeches from these thoughts, and he finds himself holding his breath whilst waiting for a response, eyes stinging.

“Why am I here?”

Aizawa swings his gaze around to stare at him. The gesture sends tingles of fear down Izuku's back. “Because you’re injured. The doctors here had to heal you, or else those wounds of yours would’ve landed you in a coffin.”

“No. Why am I *here.”*

Here, as in not in Tartarus. Not placed in cuffs. Not being sent to an orphanage, at the *very* least.

The underground hero keeps quiet for a moment before ultimately deciding to answer. He leans back in the chair, eyes narrowing. “Midoriya, I probably should have expelled you right after the USJ. Your actions during that incident gave me more than enough reason to do so. But you’re my student—a damn good one at that. You may be a problem student, but you have a lot of potential. It would be a failure on my part to let you slip through the cracks when you have the makings of an amazing hero in you.”

That heavy weight drops back into his stomach, and for a moment Izuku feels like he’s back there, trapped under a slab of concrete while his only home filled up with black smoke, his lungs screaming for cleaner air. He tugs himself out of that intrusive memory and covers his face with a hand, something warm settling over his skin. A part of him wishes he *had* gotten expelled then, as that would’ve saved him all this trouble, but another part, a *nastier* part, says that this was inevitable.

It would’ve happened with or without his expulsion, and the only difference is that maybe in those circumstances Aizawa wouldn’t have gotten to him in time.

Izuku lets out a shuddering breath. “Sensei, I—”

“I’m not finished,” Aizawa says, though his voice is softer than before. “What I did fail to do, however, is see how much trouble you’re in. As your teacher and a pro hero, it is my job to help and protect you, and I failed in doing that.”

“What?” His eyes widen as he faces him again, shock running down his back like cold water. “This isn’t your fault! It—It’s mine! There’s no way you could’ve—”

“Regardless of what you think, Midoriya, I should’ve done more to figure out your situation. I had a feeling you weren’t telling me the whole truth.” A crease forms between his brows, and he gestures with his hand at the entire room. “And look where we are now.”

Oh.

Izuku doesn’t know how to respond to that, so he doesn’t. He stays quiet, and Aizawa follows suit.

He stays quiet as the clock ticks on unfalteringly, he stays quiet as Aizawa pulls out some papers to work on to pass the time, and he even stays quiet as a nurse comes in and tells him about the extensive list of his injuries and issues.

The only thing he asks during this is if he's allowed to see Missy, which was a hard *no* before he even finished the sentence. He's not recovered enough, apparently.

Izuku scans his hospital room for the hundredth time while waiting for the sleep medicine he was given to kick in. His fever, courtesy of the infection, is going down, so at least that's happening.

His body is itching to leave this place, his mind wishing it could just turn off and pack up, and dammit Aizawa is still *sitting* there and *watching* him, unmoving.

Izuku has a ton of questions he wants to ask about how exactly he was saved, but he figures that's too fresh of a wound to mess with. So, he asks the only other important question.

"What's going to happen now?"

And why are you still here? Is what he really wants to ask. *Why do you care so much?*

"I don't know," Aizawa admits eventually, not looking up from his papers, "but I can assure you I'm not leaving you alone in it, whatever it is. I told you I would work towards your trust, right? I'm not taking that back now."

And Izuku does remember that. All those months ago, back when they met those first few times together as Rabbit and Eraserhead. Damn, those must have occurred a year ago now, huh? It's hard to think about.

Time seems to fly the fastest when you're dying.

The vending machine isn't working.

Shouta stares at the last jelly pack that sits teasingly in one of the middle rows, and he mourns for his lost change. It was an unworthy sacrifice, one that he blames the hospital staff for.

There should've been a sign, fucking hell. *Use at your own risk* would've been enough. Or maybe even *out of order,* because that's what it fucking *is.* Shouta is now convinced that the universe is out to get him, because why else would it choose *him* of all people to screw with right now. He's already had a shitty past few hours, so not getting his jelly pack is like the icing on the cake.

Good thing the hospital cafeteria is open. He might've gone insane otherwise.

Shouta ends up buying himself a hot coffee with just a spoonful of French vanilla creamer and a dash of cinnamon. It's been his go-to energy booster for years now, and it never fails to reward him with horrified looks from the people serving it to him.

It's even funnier sometimes when they see him down the cup in one go, not even flinching as the scalding liquid goes down his throat. It's truly a life-changing experience.

This time, however, Shouta takes his time with the coffee. Not just because it's a fairly decent walk to get back to Midoriya's floor and room, but because he needs something to anchor himself. The heat between his hands is a saving grace in the cold hospital, and it helps dispel most of his nerves and worries, at least for the time being.

He's done enough panicking in the last few hours; waiting outside during the surgery was hell all in itself, but then he had to actually *talk* to the kid after he woke up, which proved to be a lot harder than it sounds.

Midoriya has always been, to put it simply, a handful*,* but nowadays Shouta finds himself wanting to slam his head into a wall because of him more often than usual. He just doesn't know what to do anymore. The bombshells have just kept coming, one after another, and now he feels like it's only a matter of time before yet another one comes at them. He knows he'll have no time to prepare for whatever it'll be this time around.

The first surprise came with Rabbit's age, when the vigilante told him how old he was all those months ago during one of their outings. The second was his true identity, and the third, much to Shouta's rising horror and guilt, his *homelessness.*

He'd say that things couldn't possibly get worse from here, but honestly he doesn't want to jinx it.

The smell of antiseptic and soft chemicals clogs his nostrils, and Shouta wishes briefly that he could take a walk outside. He represses that thought, not wanting to risk straying too far from the boy. He's already left him alone for too long, even if he was sleeping when Shouta left him.

The hero's been catching up with some of his older friends at the hospital. Well, *friends* is kind of an overstatement. They're more like trusted acquaintances.

You see, Shouta doesn't have his own agency. He's an underground hero, so it'd be counterproductive to have a public building in the middle of the city where anyone and everyone can see you. He is, however, a *part* of an agency. Underground heroes are deprived of a lot of the backup and support the more well-known heroes get, so they all have to band together to stay afloat in their jobs and survive. They share information with each other sometimes and even help on solo missions.

The agency Shouta is a part of is partnered with this hospital, which is why he knows practically everyone here. When he gets injured during his patrols and Chiyo isn't available, this is usually where he goes. The staff here knows how to keep things on the down-low, so he's not worried about Midoriya's impromptu visit getting out to the public.

No one ever hears about underground hero agencies because the heroes working in them *actually do their fucking jobs.*

Besides that. Shouta may not actively enjoy or seek out any social interaction beyond what's required of him to do, but he does make sure to keep good relationships with his coworkers. Connections are good to have, as connections give you information, and information gives you *power*.

There's nothing more dangerous than an enemy who knows all of your secrets—even the secrets you never knew you had to begin with. And the thing about that is that Shouta always knows more than he lets on.

That's just how being an underground hero works. What you lack in raw power you make up for in intelligence and carefully-honed skill.

Despite his silent promise to himself, Shouta's coffee is already almost done by the time he's halfway across the first floor. The kid is on the

tenth floor, so he's headed for the elevators.

He's only slightly surprised when he catches a glimpse of long yellow hair making its way toward him from one of the nearby entrances. It's been a few hours since the conference at UA was supposed to start, so it's about time his husband arrived back.

"Honey!" Hizashi sing-songs, smiling with all his teeth.

And oh, Shouta does *not* like the look on his face. It's kind of scary, seeing as the only time Hizashi calls him that in that tone of voice is when the blond's done something stupid.

Shouta turns to him with a raise of the brow. "What did you do?"

The voice hero squawks at the non-greeting. "Why do you always assume I did something!" He relents immediately at the unimpressed look Shouta gives him. "Okay, I may have screwed up this time, but that doesn't count!"

"Get on with it, Hizashi."

"Okay, well nice to see you, too! So you know the meeting I just got back from? The one where we were supposed to figure out what to do with the listener's living situation?"

Shouta frowns at the odd choice of wording. "Supposed? You mean it didn't get done?"

"No, well, it did, it's just..."

And then the realization sinks in. Shouta stares at his husband, who has that familiar guilty-but-not-regretful look on his face, and wishes more than anything that the coffee in his hand would turn to vodka. "You offered to take him in, didn't you?"

Hizashi laughs nervously. "Okay, I don't know how you possibly guessed it that quickly, but *yes!* I did! And I just wanted to prefix this by saying that I'm *sorry* I didn't ask you first, but nobody else was eligible or willing to do it, so I figured that it'd be the most logical thing for us to do, y'know, since the listener would be *much* more comfortable around someone he knows and not a complete stranger. We also *happen* to have a spare bedroom at home that we can finally put to good use—"

Ignoring the way his heart speeds up, Shouta holds up a hand to get

his husband to slow down. He needs more coffee to even comprehend the slew of words spilling from his mouth. "'Zashi, you know we can't have a kid in our apartment."

The blond takes a deep breath and starts up again, continuing his verbal PowerPoint presentation. "You're already close to him, right? Nezu wants someone to keep the listener in check—which is dumb as hell, by the way, but you're still the best choice for that! Not to mention we're *pro heroes,* so we could get guardianship over him in the snap of a finger later on!"

Shouta scoffs as he continues walking back towards the kid's room, entering the elevator with his husband quickly following. "It's not as simple as that and you know it."

"But where else is the listener supposed to go? He's going to be sent into the foster care system, Sho, and then he won't be able to attend UA." Hizashi's voice takes on a more pleading edge. "Is that really the best decision for him? You said yourself that he has more potential than most!"

Shouta shakes his head. "Nezu could grant him a scholarship." *Lord knows how the kid was affording the school's fees anyway.* "It would pay for all out-of-area costs."

A hand grabs his arm, and Shouta looks at his husband in mild surprise, not expecting the sudden sadness to be etched into the man's features.

Hizashi has that familiar gleam in his eye. "The closest foster care that can take him is three cities over, and it would be a five-hour walk roundtrip from there to UA. It wouldn't be fair to force that on him."

And Shouta understands. He *does*. But the exhaustion is making him weary, and his patience is already thin. "He hid this from everyone, Hizashi. We're not forcing this on him."

The blond glares at him and crosses his arms. And oh boy, *this* is part of the reason why Shouta naps during his classes; he can never catch a break. See, the people who know that Hizashi and Shouta are together assume that Shouta is the more stubborn of the two, but only close friends know that that's not true. Shouta would much sooner back down in an argument if it meant the other person would shut the hell up and let him sleep instead of wasting his breath. Hizashi normally isn't like that, but to be *this* stubborn? It's obvious that this is something he's not going to budge on.

“He’s homeless, Shouta! The only place he had is now uninhabitable, and I *doubt* he’d even stay in that foster care if we made him go. He’ll run the moment he gets a chance!”

Shouta starts walking again when the elevator doors open on Midoriya’s floor, sighing when Hizashi jumps in front of him and starts to walk backward to maintain eye contact.

"We live close to UA,” the voice hero says after a brief, quiet moment. “We’re familiar to him and we’re also pro heroes, not to mention his *teachers.* We have plenty of room, a good income, and plenty of experience with children in general. *Tell me* this isn’t meant to be.”

A few more twists and turns before they make it to his room. They better wrap this up soon in case Midoriya is awake. He doesn’t want the boy to accidentally hear them talking about him. That wouldn’t be very ideal.

Shouta hates the way he feels hope at Hizashi’s word, but then something else dawns upon him. It’s obvious that Hizashi has been thinking about this for a while. His reasons are too well-thought-out and detailed for it to have been on the fly. Shouta knows why he’s so adamant about this all of a sudden. It’s kind of obvious now.

The blond comes to an abrupt halt in front of him, and Shouta sighs for the umpteenth time that day, deciding to just be blunt. “Midoriya is not a baby, Hizashi. I know you still want a child, but we’ve already talked about this. It can’t happen with our line of work.”

Furstration and surprise flits across Hizashi’s face, and Shouta instantly realizes his mistake. “I didn’t offer for us to take him in just because I want a kid, Shouta. I offered because he *needs* us. And besides, even if that was the case, that’s exactly my point! I know we can’t have a little one, but you just said he’s not a baby, so actually it’d be better for us to have a kid who’s older, right? Someone who’s not completely helpless?”

Damn Shouta’s husband and his ability to twist words. This is unfair, especially because he’s right.

“It would be difficult,” he settles on, walking forward again. The nurses and doctors walking past them don’t pay their conversation any mind, which is expected. They know better than to do that here. “He’s a vigilante, Hizashi, and he’s also a teenager with a magnet for trouble and arson. He’s not exactly fond of me right now, either.”

“That’s because you’re unapproachable,” Hizashi says, waving him off. “But come on, Sho, please? He needs somewhere he can call home. He needs someplace *stable,* and I know we can give him that and *much* more. He’ll be much happier with us than anyone else!”

He doesn’t need to try and win Shouta over on that. It doesn’t take a genius to realize Midoriya was unhappy with his previous situation. He survived the passing days, sure, but it doesn’t mean he truly *lived* them. At the beginning, Shouta thought it likely that abuse was the case, which would explain the bruises on Midoriya’s skin and his overall skittish attitude, but now, though, he sees that he was wrong.

The boy was simply cast aside and left to fend for himself—based on the little information Shouta dug up. “What about All Might? I would’ve thought he’d be dying to take the kid in,” he says, though they both know it’s a weak argument. The number one hero is an okay teacher at best, so Shouta doubts he’d be able to care for a teenager. That just doesn’t seem like something he could do.

“He tried. Nezu wouldn’t let him because of his popularity. The media would have a feeding frenzy if they found out the Symbol of Peace suddenly had a kid under his care.” Hizashi leans into him while they walk, shooting him puppy eyes (not that that ever works on him; Shouta is more of a cat person). “Which leaves us as the only option, Sho. There’s no one else.”

He knows that. And he also knows that there really is no choice—not for Shouta, at least. He doesn’t want the boy to suffer any more than he already has, and he certainly doesn’t want to push him away into foster care, destroying any last remnants of their carefully built trust once and for all.

The answer is clear. Always has been. It was a yes before the conversation even started. It was a yes before he realized there was even a question at all.

Shouta told the kid he’d stay by his side, and he never goes back on his word.

They pass by the floor-to-ceiling windows, and Shouta thinks absentmindedly that the hospital must be this empty because of how early it is in the day. Golden light is quickly rising over the tops of city buildings, and it won’t be long until the sun fully makes itself known. The moment is a peaceful one. The first warm rays of the day wash over the couple as they round the last corner, and the intake before

Shouta speaks feels like an important one. “Fine. I assume he’s going to be put under the legal custody of the school until we can get everything figured out—?”

Shouta is ready for it when his husband leaps at him before he can even finish his sentence, the blond giggling with barely contained giddiness. Hizashi hugs him tightly, speaking rapidly and excitedly near his ear, and Shouta only half-heartedly pushes him away. The windows still pose a threat for them due to any possible stray reporters or civilians with a phone. Present Mic is still a little recognizable while off-duty, and the last thing they need is a rumor floating around about the voice hero’s love life.

“Hell yeah!” Hizashi screams, knocking back into his husband as the glass rattles beside them. It’s instinct by now when Shouta activates his quirk. “This is going to be great, Sho, *trust* me! I have so many ideas for his room. He loves heroes, right? I still have that collection of old merch at the office that I’ve been thinking about giving him for a while, and I think he’d just love it if—”

Shouta listens to his husband ramble on, not even caring about the fact that he hadn’t answered the question. It’s obvious that UA will probably have legal custody over the boy for now, and seeing as Nezu wants to keep this quiet, it won’t even make the news. No one will find out about this unless they dig for it specifically, and it’s not like they can dig for something that they don’t even know exists.

But if the kid’s going to live with Hizashi and Shouta, they’re probably going to be the printed caretakers on the legal paperwork.

He honestly doesn’t know how to feel about that. He also doesn’t know how *Midoriya* is going to feel about that. They’ll have to ask him about this, of course—they can’t just kidnap him. But what if he says no (something Shouta expects will happen)? What’ll happen then?

Hizashi is still talking excitedly about room ideas and how Midoriya’s cat—Missy, he remembers—will get along great with the others. He throws in teasing *love you’s* every other sentence, which makes Shouta bury his face deeper into his capture weapon. The voice hero sounds… *livelier* than he has in a long time. He’s always been upbeat, of course, but this time is different.

This time sounds less forced. More genuine.

Shouta thinks absentmindedly that maybe this isn’t the worst outcome. That maybe this will be good for them, for everyone.

Especially for Midoriya himself.

Whether or not he'll accept that help is another story.

Hizashi is slumped over Shouta's back and dragging his feet by the time they near Midoriya's door. It's closed, which in itself isn't that weird. Shouta shut it to give him privacy when he went to get that coffee. It's been an hour since then, a little more time than he would've liked to leave the kid alone, even when he's sleeping. It's not that he doesn't trust him, it's just—actually, yeah. He wouldn't put it past the boy to do something rash at this point.

The door being closed isn't weird, but what *is* weird is the sense of wrongness that Shouta suddenly feels pressing against his temples. The air around them feels still, the space too silent. It's dead quiet.

He speeds up, and Hizashi must sense his increased urgency, because he cuts his own rambling off with a concerned frown. "What's wrong?"

Shouta doesn't answer immediately. He raps on the door twice, waiting only a second for an answer that doesn't come before pulling the handle.

It doesn't budge. The door is locked.

What the hell? He pulls a little harder.

These doors don't lock automatically upon closing for safety reasons, and Shouta would know that because this is *his* agency's private hospital. They can only lock manually from the inside. Which means Midoriya is definitely up—or something else entirely has happened, something that Shouta doesn't even want to *entertain* the thought of.

What if they found out? What if the kid's been *kidnapped?* Right from under their noses?

There's an emergency keypad on the side, and Shouta frantically punches in the four-digit code he'd memorized before grabbing at the handle.

"Calm down, Sho," Hizashi tries, laying a hand on his shoulder. "It's not like he ran off or something—"

Oh. He just had to say that, huh?

Shouta stands at the doorway for a moment, eyes fixed on the bare hospital bed while his heart starts to squeeze almost painfully. And then he's crossing the room in three strides and checking inside the closet and bathroom.

They're both empty.

Movement catches his eye, and Shouta feels the air leave his lungs when Hizashi points at the window. The window that *definitely* had a lock on it before, the window that was closed when Shouta left the room—the same window that's now *not* closed and is instead cracked open enough to allow a small breeze through.

Or a small person.

Shouta suddenly remembers in vivid detail how Midoriya had looked out the window while waiting for the medicine to kick in, that decisive look on his face. He remembers how the boy would frequently cast frustrated looks at him when he thought he wasn't looking. It's all too clear now what he was doing.

He was waiting for Shouta to leave, if only for a moment, in order to make his escape. He must've known he wouldn't have stood a chance with Shouta sitting there.

It's such an obvious course of action that the hero kind of wants to slap himself. He should've never left the kid alone. He'd known, at the back of his mind at least, that Midoriya wouldn't stay for long. Not if he had a choice.

And honestly? Shouta isn't really surprised. He would've done the same thing in his position. But that doesn't stop the sheer panic that jolts through him, though.

"Oh shit."

Izuku is alone when he stirs.

The first thing he notices upon waking up is that his quirks feel like

they're slightly more present now, which has him frantically blinking the sleep from his eyes and forcing himself to sit up. His arms and chest ache at the movement, but he pushes the feeling aside as he cautiously calls on *Extract,* checking his surroundings. He can't sense anyone close to him at the moment. The only quirks he feels are the doctors and nurses bustling about some ways behind his door.

At this knowledge, Izuku lets himself relax for a moment. There are no straps holding him down this time, so he doesn't have to worry about that. There's also no Aizawa to chastise him for what he's planning to do. They all must've left him alone, thinking he'd be asleep for at least a little while longer.

That was mistake number one.

The IV is still in the crook of his elbow, but the wires monitoring his heart are gone. That's good, in all senses, as he would've had to end up pulling those out and risk setting off alarms, which is exactly what he *doesn't* want. The boy surveys the room through keen eyes, noting the entrances and exits. There's the door leading out to the hallway, and since that's where any doctors will come in through, that's the main threat. He can't go out that way.

There's a vent in the top corner, but even if Izuku could gather up the strength to jump up there with *Boost* or One for All, he doesn't think he'd be able to fit. The laundry hatch looks too small as well—a bummer, really. Izuku's been dying to go down one of those so he can check it off his bucket list.

He knows the attached bathroom doesn't have any exits, so he's not left with many other choices. He'll have to go for the door, but that's not what—

Actually. On second thought.

Soft sunlight hits Izuku's face as clouds shift in the sky outside, and the boy's gaze slides over to the window on his left. The window that doesn't have a lock on it, more specifically.

And that was mistake number two.

Izuku feels his nerves start to dance around inside him (though it's probably because of the high-quality drugs they've got him on), and he turns to the whiteboard hanging on the wall. It says his next checkup will happen in less than an hour, according to the analog clock right above it. An hour is plenty of time, he thinks.

His mind swarms with ideas, and he finds himself gathering up the sheets beneath him. There should be extra linen in the closet next to the bathroom. If he does this right and doesn't fuck it up, this should work out smoothly after all. *And* with minimal agitation to his healing body.

Izuku rips out the IV, already missing whatever drug they were pumping into him, and swings his legs off the side of the bed. The moment his foot touches ground he stumbles, dropping like a rock. His face meets polished, too-clean tiles, and he hisses.

"Fuck."

His legs were practically crushed, he suddenly remembers. That would make sense *now,* as they're still tingling with numbness and the aftereffects he's come to associate with Recovery Girl's quirk. He's gotta make this quick, but he also can't go too fast without screwing up the healing that's already taken place.

Fuck, indeed.

It takes longer than Izuku would like to admit. Making a rope sturdy enough to hold your weight out of blankets and hospital bedsheets is harder than it sounds, especially when your hands *won't stop trembling.*

He bites down on the inside of his cheek, telling himself not to stop until he's triple-checked that none of the knots will come undone. As tempting as becoming a pancake on the sidewalk sounds, he'd rather not traumatize the poor civilians who'd have to bear witness to it.

Izuku locks his room's door and then pries open the window, freezing immediately after doing so. After ten seconds of no alarms or yelling, he deems it safe enough to poke his head out and look down.

Hm. Why am I doing this again?

Ten stories, huh? That doesn't seem very high until you're about to climb down it using a handmade rope.

Is this really worth it? Is he really about to do this? The answer is yes, to both.

He ties one end of the rope to the metal bedpost, casting a last glance back to check the time—only for that familiar yellow fabric to catch his eye. He turns slowly, thinking, and the sight of the large sweater draped over the guest chair reminds him again of how exposed he is.

The thin hospital gown he's in only does so much, and he shivers seemingly at the reminder that it's cold in here.

This is the excuse he uses to justify himself slipping the sweater on when, after five minutes of precarious lowering and cursing mixed in with heavy breathing, he's running through the relatively quiet city. He'd ended up making it halfway down the side of the building before reaching a fire escape. He can't risk scaring anyone on the lower floors, after all. It's a miracle no one spotted him.

The yellow sweater is a lot larger than he first thought. He'd assumed it to be Aizawa's or even one of the doctors, but now it's obvious whose it is. It's big enough to be a dress on him.

It's All Might's. He recognizes it now in fully clarity. The number one hero had worn it during one of their picnics. But for it to have been in his hospital room, that means the hero must've visited him when he was asleep the first time.

Why didn't Aizawa tell me he knows?

The idea of his mentor seeing him in such a vulnerable state, especially now that he knows who his successor really is and what he's done, sends shame running up his spine, but he doesn't slow down. Can't afford to. Izuku is running because he can. Because he must.

Because he wants to see how far he can go before he has to stop.

Chapter End Notes

> sometimes you have to bleed to know that you're alive. don't be afraid of the pain. be afraid to like it.
>
> e

flipped in reverse

Chapter Notes

(warnings: referenced child abuse and alcoholism)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is a master at hiding. Just as he is a master at running.

It used to be a game between him and his father; a simple hide-n-seek, if you will. Though it never felt very fun to Izuku.

No. It never felt fun at all.

The thing about regular hide-n-seek is that once the hider is found, the game is over. The participants switch roles and the game is restarted. It's an endless cycle of mystery and fun, and in all senses Izuku *should* have enjoyed it.

But it's hard to enjoy a game when you get punished for losing. Izuku was always the hider when they played, and he really, *really* didn't want to be found by the seeker.

Well, at least it was good training, no matter how scared it made him feel.

That's just how it was then. That was All for One's definition of fun.

Izuku learned very quickly on how to not get found. And he also learned how to run when he did.

Which leads him to now.

There are moments of impossibility in this world, moments that once made will echo for all of eternity even if no one is there to witness them.

Every moment in history is but a cascading chain of coincidences that, when looked back upon with the perspective of time, would make sense.

Izuku read that in a library book once maybe a year or so ago, and he's reminded of it once again as he stands in front of his crumbling home. Well, what *was* his home.

Small flecks of ash flutter from the upper levels and settle on his skin, some of them landing on his head and some by his feet. It's almost funny, he thinks, how it would all almost look like snow from a distance—just a peaceful, cascading snowfall to passersby who wouldn't know any better. Except whereas snow is cold and a promise of something new, these ashes are warm and a symbol of Izuku's loss.

He can still smell the burning wood and smoke. He can still feel the stifling heat and air so thick that for a single moment he wonders if he could cut right through it.

And then he's somewhere else, drenched and shivering from the pouring rain of a storm as lightning shakes the earth. Transported to a different time, if only in his mind, Izuku stands in front of his father's first facility and watches through younger eyes as flames scour his old home.

The sky turns a bloody red, waging a war against itself and clouds of inky black. It reminds Izuku of the copper that now sits permanently at the back of his throat.

And this was the first fire Izuku ever started. It's only fitting that All for One finally got him back in the best way. That's the one thing Izuku will admit he got from his father: his pettiness.

Everything feels like it's been turned upside-down, but in that it also feels like everything's been flipped in reverse.

He blinks back into the present, the phantom pain of his previous injuries coming back to him in a dull burn. He stares up at his not-home, teeth biting at the insides of his cheeks. While his building was never something pretty to look at, it never looked like this.

With scorched walls and remnants of black smoke permanently stained near the areas closest to the blown-out windows, his place looks *destroyed.*

It looks like someone painted their anger out onto his canvas of a building, and the result of it is nothing short of a fiery hell.

Déjà vu has a whole different meaning now.

This has to be his father's work. No one else cares about him this much to rig his entire house. No one else could've gotten past his security measures so easily. No one except the very man who *taught* him how to go unfound.

Izuku gets the sudden urge to scream, the realization like a slap to a fresh sunburn.

He's so fucking dumb. How could he have been so stupid to think he could actually get something he doesn't deserve? He's been living off borrowed time his whole life, but what does he have to show for it? Nothing.

Just a ripped costume and bloody teeth.

It's the sound that terrifies him now, or the lack thereof. True silence is impossible—the beating of the heart, the rustle of clothing, and the silent whisper of breath will always make themselves present in silence.

But now it's deathly quiet. Like the millisecond before the next intake of air. It makes Izuku stumble closer, a shaky hand coming up to touch the broken back entrance he always used when coming home.

This silence wouldn't be so bad if not for the memories it's ripping from Izuku's mind.

He walks forward, tripping a little. His legs are almost fully numb. Stumbling blindly through the city wasn't a very good idea, it turns out, especially since he's only wearing his hospital gown, All Might's large (and way too comforting) sweater, some compression socks a nurse gave him before he fell asleep, and a cat beanie he snagged from one of the vendors on the streets.

His hair probably looks terrible, as he hasn't taken a shower since before the Festival. It's best to cover it since he doesn't want attention. Not that it would make much of a difference. He already looks like he just escaped from an insane asylum with his gown on; he can't really hide much else.

Izuku can still feel the soot on his cheeks where the bandages don't cover, and his legs are still shaking even when being wrapped up.

He walks into what used to be the lobby, heading slowly for the stairs. He glances at himself in a passing window and immediately turns away. He looks rough, and he wishes more than anything that he could just forget about the scars littering his skin and mind, but nothing ever works his way, right? The haunted look in his eye stays with him as he works his way up the many flights of stairs, and he can't help but feel like he failed. Like he did something wrong.

What *hasn't* he done wrong?

It's chilly all of a sudden. It's almost like the world is mocking him, as just a few hours ago he was splintering and burning and *too hot, please, I'm choking, I'm dying,* but now he's shivering and chattering and thankful he ended up taking his mentor's sweater after all.

If Izuku makes it, All Might won't be getting it back.

He steps into his home with the acrid tang of burnt wood filling his nose. If he's being honest, he shouldn't be here. He wouldn't have come back in any other circumstance, but now everything feels different.

Everything has taken such a drastic turn in just the past twenty hours. This is not what he meant when he said he needed change.

He walks carefully, each step more unsteady than the last. His socks catch on the cracks in the wood, and he stumbles every few feet. The air seems to have settled in here, making the silence stretch on.

The heroes have left everything untouched. Not a thing is out of place since the explosions occurred, and there's no other footprints he can see imprinted in the layer of dust and ash on the floor. *Did they not care enough? Did they not care about what could be in here?*

Typical for adults, he thinks. No one even knew a kid was in the burning building. Izuku still doesn't know how exactly Aizawa found him, or if that story is even completely right at all.

And that thought has Izuku wincing. He doesn't mean to be so distrustful. He doesn't mean to be like this, but it's—it's hard.

He doesn't know anything anymore.

Izuku's couch is destroyed and barely recognizable. It's flung against the wall with half of the cushions missing, and the rest of the room doesn't look much better. The gaping hole in the middle of the floor makes something heavy drop into his stomach, and it takes all of Izuku's remaining strength to stop his knees from buckling.

He is so, so tired.

The first thing he did after escaping was find Missy. Aizawa didn't tell him where she was located for good reason, but Izuku knows this area like the back of his own hand. He knows there's only four vet clinics

around here, and he got it right on the second try. He'd walked in, asked if a tuxedo cat by the name of Missy was recently brought in, and then left after confirming her health. He wouldn't have been able to steal her back even if he'd wanted to, so he didn't attempt it.

The nurse at the front desk most definitely called the cops on him after he ran, as he does look pretty interesting right now. He probably shouldn't have done something so risky right after escaping a hospital, but whatever.

It's done now.

Izuku kicks at the piles of debris on the floor, searching. He needs to salvage whatever he can. His weapons, his bombs, his everything—it's in here. And most of it is probably destroyed.

Not to mention his phone. His AI quickly became his new method of communication after he made her, but that doesn't mean he stopped using his old one. There's still a lot of important information on there, information about his clients and jobs, and he knows for a *fact* he had it on him when the explosions went off, so he should've still had it when he was brought to the hospital. Aizawa never mentioned it, though, which is weird. Maybe it fell out and is still in here.

Izuku could be wrong. But speaking of which—

"AINA?" He calls out, voice scratchy. She's damaged beyond repair on his portable device, but a part of her still lives inside these walls. He might be able to take some pieces of her and add onto it later, and maybe he can eventually revive her. The device he deems her heart was taped to the wall in his kitchen before this, and it connected to speakers and sensors throughout the house, but he doesn't see it anywhere now. It must've been blown up.

He prays otherwise, but even as he coughs out her name two more times, the air stays still, and no reply comes back to him. Izuku feels that last bit of hope dwindle inside him.

Fuck. And to think he designed her to always be there for him no matter what.

He picks up a few knives on the ground, holding them tightly in his grip. These will be worth something on the market, he knows that for sure. If he can sell a few of them he should be able to gain back some money. Maybe enough to get him out of this country. His emergency money and passports were in a bag near his desk, so they're all gone

now, too; burnt to a crisp.

The only reason the bag wasn't in its designated hiding spot in his bedroom is because he took it out the night before for his, ahem, *trip.*

A mistake that's dearly hurting him.

All of that money? Gone. Just like that. He was saving up little by little with each job he completed, just in case of an emergency, and now it's all fucking turned to ash. That cash was his *life savings,* goddammit.

He's angry. Angrier than he has any right to be, probably. He doesn't even have enough energy to properly think about why he's angry, but all he knows is that he's pissed in a way that makes his throat tighten up and his eyes burn despite there not being any tears in his system or smoke left in the building.

I should've never stayed for this long. I should've left the country when he first offered it to me. I should've listened.

It only makes it worse when he takes another few steps, heading for his bedroom, only to trip on another piece of concrete on the scorched wood.

He hits the ground hard, the knives in his grip clattering to the floor, and the cry that tears out of his throat is of the raw sort. It scrapes against his insides, and he finds himself gritting his teeth and pressing his forehead on the dirty floor to just ground himself from everything.

But then Izuku's hand meets fabric, and his eyes fly back open. It's dark in here, but he can still kind of see it. He'd know what it is even without sight anyway.

He made it, after all.

Izuku's Rabbit costume doesn't even look like his anymore. Most of it has been shredded and burned away, and the dark green fabric is black now with the soot all over it. He sits back on his legs and holds up the tattered remains to the faint sunlight filtering in through the cracked windows.

His hoodie stares back at him, only one ear recognizable with how destroyed the other one is. The red and black of his mask is still vibrant, though, and he's glad. He paid a lot of money for the thick latex material.

But his voice changer? He doesn't even have to check the inside of his mask to know that it's completely destroyed.

Double fuck. He remembers saving up for months to buy the parts for that, and he remembers spending even longer trying to perfect it and tweak it to his liking.

God. He really is screwed.

Izuku is taking too long. His body aches in a way that it never has before, and it's not just because of his healing wounds and exhaustion. He's floating now, the faint pain echoing through his bones the only anchor he has to this world.

He should be out of here by now. He should take whatever he can salvage and escape. He knows All Might would take care of Missy for him, and since Izuku knows his mentor's number by heart he could just call him and set up a place to give One for All back after everything dies down.

Is that even possible? He thinks so. He hopes so.

It's not that he wants to give up the quirk, no. He *has* to. That's how it has to be. He's too much of a liability, and he doesn't want to keep lying to the man. If he disappears, he won't have to lie. He'll just be gone.

Maybe he should move to Mexico. He could sell chicken or baked goods on the side of the road or something and make a living out of that. Mexico has some of the greatest heroes, and everyone knows they're pretty lax about vigilantes there, so he should be fine. He could go in and make a new start. A new beginning.

But the more he thinks about it, the tighter he clutches his hoodie and mask and the whiter his knuckles get from gripping the fabric too hard.

He can't find the will to move just yet, so he sits there. And waits. After what feels like hours but what could've only been five minutes, he feels a familiar loud hero taking the stairs three at a time from the bottom of the building, and he finds that he's not surprised at all when he hears the scuffling of feet behind him, obviously on purpose, and then the creaking of wood.

Eraserhead always makes sure to let him know of his presence when sneaking up on him.

Izuku can feel his quirk now that he's located him, and it's easier now to sense the burning gaze on his back. *So much for running.*

The man steps inside the room, and the quiet echo of his boots on the uneven floor sounds like a judge tapping their gavel on a desk. Izuku must have a life sentence impending at this point, he knows.

He's known that from the very beginning.

"Your door is broken," Aizawa says from behind, voice as monotone as always. He sounds... resigned. As if expecting this exact conversation.

Did he let me escape?

Izuku covers his face with the mask, hiding and deflecting simultaneously whilst also showing more of himself than he ever has before. "Oh. I didn't notice."

A beat of silence. Izuku knows Aizawa must be thinking back to a few hours prior, when the heroes only had the fire somewhat contained and he had to bust in here and save the boy himself. He hopes Aizawa's not looking at this place now and judging. *It was prettier than this,* he wants to say. *Just like I told you. It was nice.*

He keeps quiet, though, running a crooked thumb over the seam on the remaining bunny ear.

Aizawa moves closer, his warm presence a stark contrast to the ice settling over Izuku's skin. "You know, if you had just asked me I would've taken you back here eventually. You didn't need to orchestrate a jailbreak."

Izuku stands on shaky legs, still holding his belongings, and skillfully ignores the way his vision sways. He decides not to tell his teacher that he didn't plan on getting caught this quickly, if at all.

"So you admit the hospital is a jail?"

His jab earns him a raise of the brow, making Izuku frown to himself. Damn, he really doesn't like how this medicine is turning him into Kacchan; he doesn't have a good filter right now. At least not one that is of any use to him.

Izuku shouldn't be talking this freely. It's weird now, he thinks, how he doesn't know how to act around his teacher. If he's not Rabbit,

should he be his normal timid self? Or is that too fake, seeing as the hero's already seen that abrasive other side of him.

Aizawa's hand rests lightly on his shoulder, and Izuku doesn't fight it when the man nudges him away from the gaping hole in the ground and towards the safer areas by the wall. Huh. Izuku almost forgot it was there entirely. He could've fallen straight through.

He doesn't miss how his teacher places himself between him and the cave-in. The thought makes Izuku want to laugh and cry at the same time.

"What's got you desperate enough to scale down ten stories and run all the way here?" Aizawa asks, voice not rising above his normal tone. It's not that Izuku expected him to yell, it's that he just didn't quite expect *this*.

He lifts one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "I don't know," he says softly, and it's not a lie. He holds up his Rabbit costume, as if to prove his point. "I wanted to see if I could salvage anything, but..." Izuku trails off and wipes at his nose, sighing once he sees the dirt now smeared on All Might's sweater.

"You have important things here?"

Had would be more appropriate, but Izuku nods anyway. He's still staring at the remains of his costume, clutching it tightly between his fingers. He bends down to pick up another piece of it, but when he straightens up the fabric turns to ash in his hand and flutters down the hole a few feet away.

Oh. Figures.

There's a faint spike in his mind, and he turns to see Present Mic standing hesitantly at the doorway now, having finally climbed those awful stairs. Izuku watches the way his eyes take in the destroyed apartment before him, an unidentifiable emotion flitting across his features. But when the voice hero's gaze lands on him, Izuku is met with a warm smile. He's in civilian clothes just like Aizawa is, and golden light shines on his face as he enters. His prominent eye bags make Izuku wonder yet again if either of the men have gotten any sleep lately.

He wonders just how much of that insomnia is because of him.

"Heya, kiddo," Yamada greets, easily stepping over the larger piles of

ash and debris to get over to him. He doesn't even blink at the large missing spot in the floor, seemingly unfazed. "You gave us quite the scare there back at the hospital!"

Why are you here? Izuku wants to ask abruptly. He'd expected the man to somehow make an appearance alongside Aizawa, of course, so that part isn't what's surprising him. It's rather the fact that he looks so *worried* that has Izuku reeling.

Because Yamada doesn't have to care.

He doesn't have any obligations toward Izuku. Sure, he may be his English teacher, but that doesn't mean he's responsible for him. He's not involved with Rabbit either. So for him to be here right now with such a comforting smile and warm tone? It doesn't make sense, and Izuku doesn't think he'll ever truly figure out why either of the men care so much.

He's never liked not knowing things.

Aizawa reaches for his shoulder again, but this time Izuku does lash out, panic hitting him like a sucker punch right in the gut. A shaking, bandaged hand tries to swat away the contact, but the movement only has Izuku's brain swimming and the world swaying beneath his feet. He realizes belatedly that Aizawa must've been talking to him before, and he sees the man going to steady him when he stumbles.

He swipes at him again, weaker this time, and the hero easily catches his wrist midair and holds it there, grip just tight enough so Izuku can't pull free. When Aizawa speaks, his voice is firm, but there's a gentle undertone to it that Izuku doesn't catch at first. "We need to get you back to the hospital, Midoriya. You're still not fully healed."

Izuku frowns and casts a look at the short hallway leading to his bedroom. "No. No, I need to get something." He tugs at the hold, shaking his head even as his vision swims. "Sensei, I need to leave."

"You don't."

He says it like it's a fact. Like it should be obvious, and maybe it is, but damn it all Izuku isn't in the mood for this. He's getting drowsier with each passing second. He shouldn't have waited so long to leave, but this would all admittedly be so much easier if Aizawa would just stop *caring*.

Izuku reaches up with his other hand, dropping the bunny ear to the

floor, and tries to weakly pry off the fingers holding his wrist in place. Sometimes he forgets how strong his teacher is. “I need to. You don’t understand why—”

“This isn’t debatable,” Aizawa says, grip tightening as he simply pushes away Izuku’s attempts at dislodging him. “You shouldn’t have been able to wake up so quickly from a dose like that anyway, but we can address that later. For now, what you *need* to do is stop struggling before you hurt yourself.”

He can’t stop. That’s the thing. Even if Izuku’s already come to terms with the fact that he won’t be able to evade two pro heroes in the state he’s in right now, he still needs his things. Like his notebook. The leather-bound, *fire-proof* one.

The one with all his notes on All for One and the League. The one that he keeps hidden in his bedroom despite not ever going in that room. It’s *that* important.

And the guns under the floorboard. He isn’t sure if they got damaged, but it’s better to make sure. Some of them he doesn’t even own; a few of them are ones he’s borrowing from some acquaintances at the Club.

But how is he going to tell that to Aizawa, who’s already trying to carefully tug him out of the room? This is probably the weakest Izuku has been in his life. He’s already used up his remaining strength by going down the side of the hospital and then running all the way here, so he can’t fight him. Those flights of stairs took a toll on his legs, so he can’t run either.

Yamada holds up his hands, making Aizawa pause in his tracks but still keep his hold on Izuku’s wrist. “Your health and well-being is our first priority, kiddo. We just want you to be safe. Would it make you feel better if I stayed behind and gathered up anything that didn’t get destroyed for you?”

The suddenness of the question has Izuku’s head snapping up, emerald eyes meeting kind green ones. Now that he’s actually looking at the voice hero, Izuku notices that there are faint red hues outlining the swirls that are Yamada’s pupils. It’s interesting, as the boy never noticed that before. Perhaps it only happens when Yamada is feeling upset, or maybe it has something to do with how often he uses his quirk.

He shakes himself, as there’s a more pressing conversation going on at

the moment. “Why would you—?”

“You said you have important stuff here, yeah?” Yamada asks somewhat cheerfully. “Maybe I can find what’s left while Sho takes you back to the hospital, how does that sound?”

Sho. Izuku doesn’t miss the deliberate use of Aizawa’s first name. Or, well, a shortened version of it. *I am now certain my theory is correct.*

And that—that would be good. Not the hospital bit, of course, but Yamada is bound to find the stuff Izuku missed or didn’t have a chance to look for. The important stuff, like his notebook that he just *can’t leave behind;* the files he’s gathered over the years; his expanse of weapons; and even more stuff.

Yamada must see the hopeful look on his face because he smiles again, eyes crinkling. “I’ll make sure to bring everything back to you, ‘kay?”

Izuku can only nod, surprised at his own eagerness and willingness to trust the hero with that. Well, maybe *trust* is a strong word. Izuku is kind of desperate to get his things back, even if he probably won’t be allowed to have any of it for long. There’s no telling if his other two safe houses have been raided too, so this might be the only place to gather up the rest of his belongings.

He opens him mouth to thank his teacher and tell him where to check in his bedroom, only to break out in a fit of coughs. Fuck, he can barely breathe. The heavy air is starting to clog his lungs.

Aizawa says something quickly to his coworker (or maybe partner?) and promptly steers Izuku out of the room despite the boy’s muffled protest, leading him down the scorched hallway. The stairs laugh at the boy as they near it, and Izuku can already feel the dread coil inside him.

It’s just going down ten flights of stairs, right? It can’t be that much more difficult than going up.

“Do you need me to carry you?” Aizawa asks, and Izuku blinks.

At first he thinks the hero is teasing him, but then he glances up to find him looking as serious as ever, not a hint of amusement on his face.

Uh, yeah, no thanks.

Izuku would rather die than be carried down by his teacher. That is *mortifying.* He's fine. He can handle some stairs. It can't be that bad—

His knee buckles the moment he goes down the first step, and he would've tumbled hard had Aizawa not grabbed his upper arm and jerked him back at the last moment.

Turns out that going downstairs is actually harder than going upstairs.

Izuku refrains from looking at the underground hero at all as they slowly make their way down. Aizawa is holding onto his arm tightly, which is basically the only thing keeping Izuku upright, though he'll never admit it. This is beyond embarrassing. He feels like an elderly grandma.

They're halfway down when Aizawa side-eyes him. "What's with the cat beanie?"

Yeah, okay. *Now* he's definitely teasing him. Izuku would like to politely ask his teacher to let go of his arm so he can just fall the rest of the way down. There's only like a sixty percent chance he'll die.

I didn't steal it from a street vendor if that's what you're asking.

It's just their luck when, on the second to last flight, the wood gives way beneath them and almost sends them both falling straight through. Oh, yeah. Izuku forgot just how unstable the building was even before the fire.

Aizawa grumbles something about vigilantes and picking the most hazardous places of living in the entire country of Japan, but the boy doesn't pay him any mind.

He's suddenly self-conscious when they make it outside. The air is getting colder, and his clothes aren't doing much for him. He's in equal parts curious and relieved when Aizawa opens up the passenger door of a car parked on the side of the road.

He wasn't aware the man even *had* such a nice vehicle. It looks sleek, almost government-issued, and Izuku thinks to himself briefly that he's too poor to even breathe the same air that this car drives in.

Aizawa climbs into the driver's side and stares at him. "C'mon, you're going to freeze half to death." He narrows his eyes when Izuku doesn't move. "Or you can stand there all day and let people stare at you. Your choice."

The boy flushes, hesitantly sliding inside with a slight wince, shutting the door gently. He wouldn't want to break anything of the hero's. He'd never be able to forgive himself.

"It smells like," his voice dies out, and Izuku clears his throat to try again. "It smells like cherries in here."

Yeah, that's not weird at all. This is just Izuku trying to start conversation.

Aizawa turns on the heater and gives him a sidelong glance. "Okay."

Nailed it.

He studies the inside of the car, still trembling. He still can't fully process what's happening. He's in his teacher's car. He's heading back to a hospital almost *willingly* just over an hour or so after escaping from it. That part is a change in itself. He'd never do something like this willingly. His identity is revealed now, and so is his homelessness. Which means there's not many options awaiting Izuku once they both get back. He wonders what'll happen.

"Put on your seatbelt," Aizawa chides suddenly, pulling out into the street. "I'm not the best at driving."

Izuku honestly didn't think he even knew how to drive. He just doesn't seem like the type to want to, nor does he seem like the type to put cherry air fresheners in his car to keep it nice. That must be Yamada's doing.

It's awkward the whole ride there, at least to Izuku. The hospital isn't that far away, but traffic is busy this morning.

He can usually take silence, since it's not usually as suffocating as the one he felt at his old home, but luck just doesn't seem to be on his side today. He doesn't like this emptiness one bit. Not even the radio is on to fill the void.

Which leaves Izuku talking to himself. In his mind.

What if I open the door right now and roll out onto the sidewalk. What's the chance of me actually being able to get up in time to escape?

But just as he's thinking he should try it, just to see, there's a click as all the doors lock around the car.

Fucking witchcraft. Aizawa must be a mindreader, or he's just known Izuku long enough to predict his upcoming rash ideas and stunts. That can't be entirely true, though, as the hero *did* leave him alone for an undetermined amount of time in that hospital room. If he knows him so well, he should've expected Izuku to blast out of there the moment he got a chance.

But then again he found him pretty quickly. He knew exactly where Izuku would go. So something's not right here. There's something he's missing, and it's making him irritated because he just *can't figure it out.* He's usually better than this. He can usually pick out small details and put them together. But at the moment he can barely figure out what two plus two is.

Which brings back up Izuku's other question. *Did he let me leave, or am I just that hopeful? Am I looking into things that aren't there?*

He risks a small look at his teacher, eyes going first to his face and his clenched jaw, the way his eyebrows are furrowed slightly, as if deep in thought. And then he looks at the way his hands are holding the steering wheel hard enough to make his knuckles white.

Aizawa looks... perturbed? No, annoyed would be a better word. He looks upset, and the way he's staring out at the road with a controlled kind of determination makes something heavy drop into Izuku's stomach.

Is he angry? At *him?* But why would he be? Well, besides the whole running away thing. Izuku doesn't know what else he could've done to piss him off, and he finds himself racking his brain for an answer.

He wants to ask if he's mad, but Izuku loses the nerve to do it the moment he opens his mouth. Asking never went well with his father. Perhaps he should redirect instead. That always had a good chance at working back then.

Izuku shifts in his seat, looking back out the window. His heart is pounding in his ears. "What's going to happen next?"

For a few moments there's nothing, and Izuku fiddles with the sleeves of All Might's sweater to stop himself from rambling to fill the silence.

But then a finger reaches over to press one of the buttons below the dashboard, and the car starts to *move by itself.*

And what the hell? It's a self-driving car? How did Aizawa afford this? Why would Aizawa *want* to even afford this?

The man takes his hands off the steering wheel, folding his arms across his chest as he turns to look at him fully. Izuku resolutely does not meet his gaze, afraid of what he might find there.

"You didn't believe a word I said to you at the hospital, did you?"

Izuku winces. "That's not—"

"You ran because you felt you had no choice. You wouldn't have done that if you trusted my word." He tips his head in consideration. "But seriously, kid, the window? They had an elevator, you know. Would've saved yourself some effort."

His words are slightly annoyed, but they make Izuku smile nonetheless, as hesitant as it is. He stares at the glove compartment and has to physically stop himself from opening it and rummaging around inside. Normally he'd be all for looting, but this is Aizawa's stuff. He might need whatever's inside for hero business later.

Izuku rubs his arms to soothe himself, staring at the small scuff marks on the dashboard. It looks like someone constantly puts their feet up here. "Where did you get the car?" He asks, just wanting him to keep talking. He can ignore the previous question for now.

If he keeps talking he might not stay mad, and Izuku can finally allow himself to relax just a little. Because the thing is, Aizawa usually lectures him when he does stupid shit like this. He's done it before multiple time as both Aizawa Shouta and Eraserhead, so there's no reason why he wouldn't now. But the hero doesn't lecture. He doesn't let any anger bleed into his voice, which can either mean he's really not angry, or that he's just a master at hiding it.

"Principal Nezu gave it to me as a gift," Aizawa explains, leaning back in his seat. "He said our old car wasn't suitable for staff at UA."

Our. He isn't hiding it anymore.

They stop talking after that, having pulled up to the hospital. There's still no lecture, though Izuku can feel one brewing. It's only a matter of time. The other shoe has to drop, for everything is just too *easy.*

After Aizawa checks him in at the front desk, they take the elevator this time, a fact that his teacher smugly points out as they go up to his

floor.

He's given a different room this time, and Aizawa sticks right beside him the whole way there, as if afraid he'll book it again. Which, honestly, isn't too far from the truth. He probably would've tried to run into the crowds and disappear before even getting into Aizawa's damn car, but his leg is being a bitch. He can barely walk correctly.

The doctors are quick to share their disapproval at his disappearance, scolding him for potentially making his healing injuries worse, and it's only after Izuku has apologized to five different people (with Aizawa watching like a hawk by the entrance to the room) that they leave. Recovery Girl will apparently be in again in just half an hour to see him.

He shudders at the thought. No one is safe from the old lady's sharp tongue.

Izuku is a flight-risk now, unfortunately, which means he can't be left alone at all until that's lifted. Aizawa has offered to be the guard, something that both confuses and relieves Izuku.

Confuses because honestly, Aizawa shouldn't be here. He doesn't *have* to be here. It's his day off, Izuku knows, and he's wasting it on him. *Relieves* because that means no one else will be watching over him. He doesn't trust anyone else in this hospital, no matter how quiet or unassuming they act.

When Izuku asks about All Might and his whereabouts, as surely his mentor isn't planning on just leaving his sweater here forever, Aizawa just says he had to attend some meetings and won't be back for awhile.

Izuku doesn't know why he's disappointed. He should be relieved he doesn't have to face him so soon.

One more day. One more day at the hospital, and then he should be cleared to leave.

Leave where, Aizawa won't tell him. He says Yamada should be here when he tells him, which only makes the pit of dread inside Izuku grow. If it's not prison or an orphanage, what is it?

Where is he *going*? And why has Aizawa just... taken on this role of watching over him? Why hasn't he left by now?

Asking won't get him anywhere, so Izuku just stares at his bedsheets and plays with the ring on his finger until Recovery Girl arrives. She starts to shoo Aizawa out, but the man doesn't budge out of his seat.

"I'm on watch, Chiyo. He's a flight—"

"I may be old," the healer snaps, pointing her cane at him threateningly, "but I can still take care of my patients! Now go! He won't run again, will you, young man?"

She turns her fiery gaze upon him, and Izuku straightens up immediately. "No, ma'am!"

Not from you, he thinks. She might just clock him in the shins with her cane if he moves wrong, and he's not willing to go that far.

Aizawa snorts at Izuku's quick answer and gets up, leaving the two of them alone.

Which is *scary*. Recovery Girl has this knowing look in her eye, and it sets off warning bells in Izuku's head.

She starts off by checking over Izuku's body for new injuries despite the previous doctors having already done so. She plants a kiss on his forehead to kickstart the rest of the healing, and Izuku falls back into the bed, sighing as he watches the green glow fade away.

"I'm not finished with you yet, Midoriya. Normally I wouldn't discuss this in such detail with my patient when they're still recovering, but it's imperative we get this out of the way now."

Fuck. Izuku chuckles nervously, the brief thought of *I'm in danger* flashing across his mind. He brings his knees up to his chest and watches with wide eyes as she rolls the stool to the edge of the bed. There's a stack of papers in her hand, and he takes them with trembling fingers, suddenly glad that she made Aizawa leave.

This isn't going to be a pleasant conversation.

"I know you're already aware of most of your injuries and shortcomings, so I won't waste my breath. That," she points at the papers that are now sitting in Izuku's arms, "is what I really want to talk with you about."

Izuku swallows. "My blood results?"

She nods, not looking pleased in the slightest. “Now, I don’t expect you to be able to read those charts or be able to fully understand what’s all on there, but I can tell just by the look on your face that you know the gist of what I’m about to tell you.”

Izuku was wrong. Things can, in fact, get worse. The healer knows something is wrong. She *knows.*

“Your blood is, for lack of better terminology, *damaged,* dearie,” Recovery Girl begins, sounding solemn. “It looks almost as if it’s been tampered with, and one doesn’t need a biology degree to understand why that’s so alarming.”

She fucking knows. The one thing Izuku didn’t want to happen, and here he is. Maybe he should’ve just said *fuck it* and jumped out of Aizawa’s car when he had the chance after all. He’d prefer that over this conversation any day.

“It’s like there’s multiple different kinds of blood inside you, all mutated together to bind to your own. Your files stated you have type O blood, which means you’re compatible with all other types. Even still, it’s almost as if there’s something else there that’s not combining correctly. In all senses, Midoriya, you shouldn’t even be alive. It’s unnatural for sure. I’ve never seen anything like it in all my years.” She takes one of the papers off the bottom of the stack and shows the diagram to him. “Your DNA looks to have been torn apart and stitched back together multiple times, and by its own volition, too. If I didn’t know any better, I’d even say it was integrating new pieces of information into your genetic code and rebuilding around it.”

It’s almost scary how accurate that is, and that’s just her *guess.* Izuku never really thought of it that way before, but now that she’s said it he can picture it all too clearly.

Every new quirk he got, the more his blood had to adapt. The more of himself he had to destroy in order to change.

She’s watching him quietly, and Izuku realizes that she must be waiting for an answer. He stares at a point on the wall just past her head when he replies. “It’s, um, been like that for awhile? I’ve lived like this for a long time, so I think it’s fine? I can—I can survive it. My doctor said it was okay. When I was younger, I mean.”

He can survive with fucked up DNA. It’s not hurting him. Technically it’s the *sickness* that stems from the quirk that’s causing all of what’s hurting him. His body was made to withstand this kind of change with

his blood.

That doesn't make it any less disturbing to others, however.

"I understand this may be normal for you, Midoriya, but that doesn't change why it's like that to begin with. And that also doesn't change the fact that I cannot even contact the singular doctor that was listed on your profile." She rubs her temple, sighing deeply. "But there's something else that I cannot pinpoint. I haven't shared this with anyone except Aizawa, but your quirk is severely imbalanced. It is the root of most of your bodily issues, though I doubt everything is solely the fault of your original quirk."

That's not untrue.

Recovery Girl's face morphs into one of faint suspicion. "You'd tell us if there were any developments with One for All, wouldn't you? Information regarding that quirk is very important, Midoriya. You mustn't hide anything from All Might or myself. You will end up back in the hospital that way."

Does she know about my multiple quirks? Does she know about how One for All is kickstarting my death and sending poison through my veins, even right now as we're talking?

"Of course I would," he says, frowning. The lie tastes about as promising as the copper between his teeth. He's been chewing too much on his bottom lip. "I wouldn't keep it from you."

She doesn't look entirely convinced, but she concedes with a nod anyway. "I do not think One for All itself is causing all of your issues, but it's still a plausible theory. I expect you to tell All Might about this possibility, understand? If One for All is causing you harm, we need to know. I'll give you a few weeks, and if you haven't done it by then, I will."

Is it causing him harm? Indirectly, yes. But who's fault is that, really? Izuku has no one to blame but himself.

"Yes, ma'am."

When Recovery Girl leaves fifteen minutes later after talking more about his blood and the potential link it has to One for All, there's something new weighing him down by the stomach.

She disappears from the room, and Izuku thinks absentmindedly that

more than one door has just closed on him.

His student's home is ugly.

Hizashi won't beat around the bush. It truly is.

He knows, of course, that the building did just go through multiple bombings and an inferno raging through its insides, but still.

He stands off to the side of Midoriya's apartment, scanning the piles of debris for anything he can take back to the kid. He's honestly surprised his student is even letting him do this in the first place. He'd expected a hard no, or at the very least some hesitance, but that wasn't the case.

The kid must really be out of it.

Hizashi walks into the kitchen and peeks inside the overturned fridge, lips pressing into a thin line once he finds nothing but wet cat food and expired skim milk.

He doesn't bother carrying those items, instead turning around to check the cabinets and floor.

Nothing so far. Well, except for a few weapons taped under blackened counters and near-unrecognizable notebooks thrown to the floor near what looks like Midoriya's old desk.

The kid probably won't find anything of use in the notebooks, saying as most of the pages have been turned to ash, but Hizashi sets them into his bag anyway.

Unfortunately, the weapons won't be able to be permanently given back to him, but it's good to pick them up anyway so no villains can get their hands on them.

He makes sure to pick up whatever remnants he can find of his Rabbit costume. He knows Midoriya might want to keep whatever's left of it.

The next thing he finds is a manila envelope tucked inside a narrow crack in the wall. Hizashi probably wouldn't have noticed it if not for its attention-grabbing color. He forces himself not to look too much, even as he starts to crave some drama. There's a few pictures inside, and he puts it in the bag before he can snoop.

Hizashi isn't about to breach the kid's privacy. And besides, he needs to hurry it along. The floor is unsteady here, and he's not planning on falling through anytime soon.

Everything is fine until he gets to the last room—Midoriya's bedroom.

It's obvious he very rarely comes in here, and when he does he makes sure not to move much. There's just a few more guns and ammo (and even a flamethrower!), but that's not what has him upset. It's the dresser that makes him tip his head, because oh.

Suddenly it makes sense in the worst way.

The listener's hidden a bottle of vodka in his dresser. It's a big thing, takes two hands to hold it properly. It's next to another one of Midoriya's journals, this one looking a lot more sturdy and unharmed than the others, and is surrounded by patterned socks. There's soft pink ones that are slightly charred on the tips, and there's ones with stars on them.

Hizashi would almost coo if it were any other time.

But that traitorous bottle is demanding of his attention, and the more he looks at it, the more he's taken *back*.

This alcohol right here? It almost ended his career when he first became a hero. It almost killed him.

He remembers, abruptly, how his own bottle would begin to rattle in his dresser sometimes on those sleepless nights. He remembers how it would sound, more specifically, and he shudders at the reminder.

He remembers it sounding like his bones. He remembers it sounding like his death.

Life was tough for Hizashi after his second year of high school. After everything that happened, he had very little to hold onto. His third year passed by too slow yet too fast all at the same time, and after graduation, alcohol became his anchor. It helped him ground himself. It helped him stay rooted to this cruel earth.

But the thing about being your own anchor is that first you have to drown.

Shouta was his saving grace back then. He helped him out of that hole as best he could, and Hizashi will always owe him for that. They were both dealing with their own personal issues, and yet their struggles were the same.

So to see another person, another *teenager* going down the same road Hizashi took? It's like a hammer to his ribcage, because *no*. Midoriya doesn't deserve this.

No one deserves the kind of pain that makes them believe they have to do something harmful to themself in order to just stay afloat. It is a fate worse than death.

He grits his teeth and stuffs the thick, leather-bound journal in his bag, along with the fluffy socks. He grabs the vodka with slightly shaky hands and pours it out into the drain in the bathroom. It was more than half empty, and the sales sticker on the side says it was bought just over a week or so ago.

That's not good. Not good at all. He drank that much in so little time? That's beyond dangerous.

He decides to keep the empty bottle. Just in case. He doesn't think it's his place to talk to the kid about this, so maybe he can ask Shouta to do it since he knows him better.

Either way, he knows confronting him won't be pleasant. The listener will instantly be on the defensive, and he doesn't want to do that to him. That's the very last thing he wants, actually.

But that's a matter for a different time. No use stressing about it yet. He's supposed to be happy that the kid is finally out of this place.

For now, Hizashi just leaves the home with a heavy heart and a mind full of hopeful dreams.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter inspired by this song on youtube

v

relocate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toshinori is usually a patient man.

As the number one hero, he kind of has to be. He wouldn't be where he is otherwise. Sure, he runs headfirst into battles sometimes on nothing more than a whim and is probably too reckless for his own good, but he's certainly not stupid.

He isn't a child, and nor is he innocent by any means. He knows that good things come to those who wait.

In this very moment, however? In this specific circumstance? Toshinori is finding it very hard to be patient now. He doesn't want to just sit here and do nothing. That's not what heroes do. That's not what a *mentor* is supposed to do.

Toshinori is usually a patient man, but not when his kid is involved.

"I don't understand why I can't see him," he mutters, pacing the length of the large office with a hand on his chin. He's irritated, but he has every right to be.

"Calm yourself, please," Principal Nezu says. The mammal pushes a cup of golden liquid his way. "Would you like some tea?"

Toshinori stops pacing to stare at his boss. Is he seriously asking if he wants *tea?* Now, of all times? He shakes his head and resumes his troubled thinking. "I'm fine, thank you. I'm more concerned as to why you're keeping me here, Nezu."

A small sigh leaves the principal. "Don't be so dramatic, Yagi. If you truly didn't want to be here, you simply would not be. I doubt even I would be able to stop you from leaving this campus."

Honestly, Toshinori doubts that. Who knows what kind of contraptions the smaller hero has in this very office? Hell, he most definitely has some form of All Might level restraints. Toshinori isn't naive enough to believe he'd win easily in a fight against the mammal, especially when you take into account Nezu's intelligence. The number one hero won't stand a chance if his boss has access to his

own equipment and support weapons.

Toshinori shivers at the mere thought. But besides that.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” he says in annoyance, glaring out the window. There’s something about his boss that’s making his nerves twitch. It’s making it hard to keep his composure.

“I’m sure you’re aware that Midoriya isn’t doing very well, Yagi. Both emotionally and physically, the boy’s well-being has been compromised.” There’s the sound of small clinking; Nezu is stirring his tea. “I’m afraid that seeing you would do more harm than good. He needs time to settle in.”

Toshinori’s head snaps toward him. “Settle in? They’re taking him *now?”*

The mammal hums and waves at the clock on his desk. “He will be released from the hospital in less than an hour, if all things go as planned. Aizawa and Yamada will be taking him to their household then.”

Damn it all. It’s been a day since he left the boy’s side to go to that stupid meeting—a day since Nezu stopped him from returning to him. And the worst part is the mammal hasn’t even given him a straight answer as to *why.*

“Why can’t I see him just for a few minutes? He is my successor, Nezu! I promised to be there for him—!” Toshinori dissolves into a fit of coughs and pointedly ignores the tissue box Nezu slides across the desk. “He probably thinks I don’t want to see him. He’s going to overthink things and worry himself *sick* if I don’t come to see him!”

“I understand, but it’s important that you remain here for the time being. It would help Midoriya more in the long run if you gave us a little insight to this particular situation.”

No, Toshinori thinks bitterly. *You just want to use me to out all of his secrets.*

The hero sighs and swipes a large hand down his bony face. “What do you want to know?”

“Before that, it’s important you know that it is not my intention to harm the boy with whatever information you might give. It is rather obvious you don’t trust me at the moment.” The principal leans

forward in his chair. “But I hope you can work past that, as this will prove to be a learning experience for the both of us.”

Toshinori doesn’t answer right away. Instead he stares out the window and counts the droplets of rain that slide down the glass. He watches as the faraway trees dance in the wind and smack each other with their branches. The storm is so bad that he can feel the cracks of thunder reverberating in his bones.

It’s not quite that he doesn’t trust Nezu. He does, really. As scary and sadistic as his boss is, Toshinori knows he cares. At least artificially so. He wouldn’t hurt one of his students, especially not one as important as Midoriya Izuku.

Toshinori just doesn’t want to make Midoriya hate him. He feels as though he’s already broken some of the boy’s trust, as if he’s already taken a hammer to their shared bond simply by just *being* here and talking about him behind his back. He doesn’t even know the full story himself, so who is he to spill the boy’s secrets—secrets that he doesn’t even fully know?

Vigilante or not, Midoriya doesn’t deserve to go through this pain, and he doesn’t deserve to have people putting his name in their mouths when they know close to nothing about him. Hell, it seems that not even Toshinori knows anything about him.

It hurts a lot, the hero will admit, that he wasn’t on the list of people the boy felt he could talk to, but he’ll just have to get over that. The most important thing right now is getting Midoriya out of the shitty situation he’s been thrown in.

He can’t help but wonder, however, what his teacher would think of all this. Gran would probably kick his ass for being so ignorant and go on another rant about how incapable Toshinori is of teaching—which, if the current situation has anything to say about it, isn’t a lie. They probably wouldn’t be dealing with all of this right now if Toshinori could’ve just been *better*.

But with that fact comes another thought; the other edge of what is the unfortunate truth.

What would *she* think of all this?

A leaf sticks to the side of the wet window, and Toshinori grits his teeth. “I told you a while ago how I met Young Midoriya. What else do you need from me? He doesn’t tell me a lot about his personal life,

and it was never my place to ask."

"I've already figured out most of his personal connections and relationships, so you don't need to go into detail there. I am simply asking if there's ever been a time or event in which the boy has said something that perhaps struck you as odd." Nezu begins to type quickly on his computer, though his beady eyes never leave Toshinori's form. "Perhaps a word or phrase, or even a simple action, that made you pause for a moment. Something that might prove useful in the long run."

Toshinori, who's still stuck on the first part, has to push down the anger working up his throat at Nezu's lack of decency. Does he not care about Midoriya's privacy at all? He turns and takes a seat before the desk, his body aching at the incessant pacing.

"He's always been... unusual," Toshinori says, hating himself for even uttering these words behind his successor's back. "But that's just how he is, Nezu. I figured he had a lot of secrets, but I never pushed unless I thought they might be hurting him."

Like the lack of eating, he thinks to himself. *And the bruises and burns on his skin.*

The hero puts a hand over his face. "He would forget to eat sometimes, so I fed him when I could. The marks the doctors found on his body yesterday? He would tell me he got them by training at home."

"An obvious lie," Nezu chirps, causing Toshinori to wince. "It's clear now how those problems came to be. I imagine his vigilante activities became very harmful to his body after a period of time. Which leads me to our next topic."

The mammal presses a paw to the screen and enlarges it into a hologram, twisting it so Toshinori can see.

And *fuck.* The collage of pictures that greets him is not something he would've ever wanted to see so early in the morning. He can barely stomach the sight that sits before him.

"The bodies Aizawa found near Midoriya's building have left me with little answers and a ton of questions." Nezu zooms in on a few of the pictures, gesturing at the bloody, limp figures still stuck to the rooftops. "There's twenty-four of them, consisting of both heroes and villains. I hate to ask so bluntly, but do they mean anything to you,

Yagi?”

Nezu swipes the screen, showing a list of profiles with each victims’ name and occupation attached to their face. Toshinori furrows his eyebrows, hands gripping the arms of his chair as he leans forward to get a better look. “I don’t think so, no. I might have seen a few of them in passing, but I don’t know them personally.”

“As I suspected. It seems they did not go after Midoriya because of his connections with you.”

Toshinori deflates, blowing out the breath he didn’t realized he’d been holding. “That’s—that’s good.”

That makes him feel a little bit better, at least.

“Indeed. This does, however, pose a lot of interesting questions. The attackers seem to have known about Midoriya’s alter ego prior to the bombing. According to Aizawa, Midoriya revealed they have also been trailing him for a bit of time leading up to this incident.”

Toshinori sputters, the words not quite registering at first. “They *what?* That’s—that’s impossible! He would’ve told me! He would’ve —!”

“So everyone else has said, too.” Nezu’s voice suddenly takes on a more sympathetic tone as he minimizes the hologram. “Despite everyone’s shock, the fact remains that Midoriya knew about his pursuers beforehand and chose not to reach out for help. He doesn’t seem to be willing to share anything regarding his personal life or vigilante persona, which is to be expected as of this moment. I doubt we will make any true progress with that for a long while yet. We are, as they say, playing a waiting game.”

A waiting game. The three words make Toshinori want to thunk his head onto the desk and never wake up. Honestly, fuck the idea of being patient. It’s a scam created by the government to get people to overlook their wrongdoings.

God. Now he’s starting to sound like the kid.

“I must admit that he’s at least making this an interesting game, Yagi. While I was counting on him to run the moment he saw the unlocked window, it still took me by quite the surprise. Scaling down a hospital is not an easy feat, I assure you.”

For a moment, Toshinori is sure he's misheard his boss, because *what the actual fuck?* Did he just say *scaling down a hospital?*

"What? He ran?" The panic that grips him almost has him spewing blood. He snaps to his feet, eyes wide. "When?"

Nezu simply waves him off, either not noticing his terror or not caring. "It's nothing to worry yourself over. Aizawa and Yamada were fortunately nearby and escorted him back before he could get very far."

The cryptic, near pleased tone of the mammal's words has Toshinori reeling. "Was he hurt? Why didn't I see this on the news? Surely someone would've been alarmed at seeing him run around the streets looking so beat up!"

And, more importantly, why wasn't I informed? He thinks bitterly, a fierce surge of protectiveness washing over him. *I should've been one of the first told. I could've helped!*

"This remained a private affair because I wished it so," Nezu answers with startling calmness, not offering an elaboration. "Midoriya is making it very difficult to keep this under wraps. He is, dare I say, *trying* to get us in a bit of legal trouble so we will be forced to let him go for now."

Toshinori sits back down with a huff, slightly less agitated at being told so late. His boss is making it sound like they're going to keep Midoriya prisoner. Toshinori knows he doesn't like doctors, so he can understand how the boy might feel like that at the hospital, but what about once he's released to stay with Aizawa and Yamada? The entire point of them watching over him is so he *won't* feel trapped.

But the more Toshinori thinks about it, the more he sees it.

He chews on his bottom lip, a tic that he thought his own mentor had scared out of him before graduating from UA. "You know he's not going to like being stuck in an unfamiliar house with nothing to do. He starts to get jittery when he's anxious."

His impulse control also seems to disappear, Toshinori thinks, remembering that occasion where Midoriya somehow got into a fight with a woodpecker in the five minutes he left the boy alone at the park.

"Of course," Nezu agrees. "Which is precisely why he will be closely

monitored for the time being. He's already run from help once, and I have no doubts he'll attempt to do so again."

Something heavy lodges in his throat. Toshinori closes his eyes briefly and twists his neck to peer out the window again. He had figured, at the very back of his mind, that this would be the case. That Midoriya wouldn't accept this new situation so easily—not without a fight, at least.

He's known Midoriya for close to a year now. The boy has a problem with trust, that much is obvious, and he has an even bigger problem with sharing his emotions. It's only fitting that he'd have a problem with people helping him, too.

"Do you think he's trying to leave for good?" He asks, watching the wind die down for a moment before picking back up again.

Nezu runs his paws along the edge of his desk. "It appears so. That is why it was best for all of us to let Aizawa and Yamada handle his escape from the hospital. I personally believe they're the two best candidates for defusing this situation, so to speak."

Fuck. The worst part of all this is that Toshinori thinks so, too. He wouldn't be able to help Midoriya in any way that matters. He's obviously done a poor job up to now.

The mammal is right, but the guilt is still there, weighing him down and souring his insides, and he can't help but try again, one more time. "If you'd let me see him for just a moment, I swear I'll do anything! I—I left my sweater on his chair!"

There's a small quirk of the principal's lip. "The boy is keeping very good care of your sweater, though whether or not it will return to you later is still up for debate."

Damnit. Why must Nezu be so stubborn? Toshinori feels like a sad parent who's begging with the judge for visitation rights.

"The students only had yesterday and today off," Toshinori starts, trying to trip him up. "What will happen to him tomorrow when school starts again?"

"He will be on break for a week. All excused absences, mind you. As I said, Aizawa will be staying with him to keep him company until he's fully healed, as he's still very much a flight risk."

The term *prisoner* is suddenly starting to sound all the more appropriate, huh? This doesn't sound humane at all, but it's not like they have a better option. They can't just let Midoriya run again, can they? He'll hurt himself.

The blond hero is resigned more than anything now. "What about the internships? They start up right after next week, don't they?"

"The internships will be pushed back." Principal Nezu smiles, revealing pointed white teeth. "It's standard protocol when a student turns out to be a wanted vigilante."

Toshinori snorts despite himself, the irony of it all finally getting to him. His yellow suit feels near suffocating on his thin body. It's like they're all in a very weird limbo, like they're just waiting for something to happen.

Hopefully it's good, whatever it might be. Lord knows they won't be able to handle another bomb dropped on them.

Nezu lets the comfortable silence stretch on for a minute before sharpening his expression. "You know why I really called you here again."

It's sickly sweet, almost falsely cheerful, and Toshinori bows his head. Sweat beads at the top of his forehead near his hands. He does know. He's very much aware of the question Nezu *truly* wanted to ask him. And yet it still takes him a few seconds to formulate a response.

"This doesn't feel like All for One's doing. If he somehow knew—" he chokes up, but it's not because of blood this time. "If he knew I was training Young Midoriya, he would've just taken him. Especially if he knew I already passed it on. He wouldn't have failed and just left him for dead, Nezu. That's... that's not his style."

No. If he truly wanted to, All for One would've swiped the boy out from under his nose and gloated about it on live TV, probably.

But it doesn't matter. There's no proof that All for One is even still alive. He—he's dead, as far as All Might is concerned. Anything that says otherwise is just pure speculation.

Nezu sighs painfully. "Of course. My apologies, I just needed your input. But pushing that aside, there's also the matter of who ended all of those heroes and villains the other night. The scene was quite gory, as you saw. I also believe whoever it was also dropped off our dear

cat."

Toshinori frowns at the word choice. "I was under the impression they killed each other? Did they not?"

"That's what the police were told, Yagi, and it's not far from the truth. Upon closer inspection, however," a swipe of the paw brings back up the pictures on the hologram, "it seems they all died of the same wounds. They're all of the same pattern and technique. It's as if they were working together against one force, rather than against each other."

Oh, this is definitely not All for One's doing, either. That isn't his style of killing.

He sucks in a breath. The idea of heroes working with villains is like taboo. No one is willing to even risk thinking something like that lest they get attacked. But it has to be possible in this case if *Nezu* is suggesting it.

"Working together? Then what happened to them, do you think?"

Nezu puts his paws together, the light catching on his perfectly-manicured nails. "I'm sure you've heard of what happened to Ingenium just a couple of days ago?"

The hero jolts. "You're not saying—"

"Unfortunately so." He shakes his head, displeased, but Toshinori knows better. Nezu is damn near *excited* at these turn of events. The principal loves puzzles, and this one has a ton of pieces that just don't quite seem to fit anywhere. It must be like a goldmine for the mammal.

Damnit, Young Midoriya. What have you gotten yourself into?

"I believe the Hero Killer has some sort of past relationship with Midoriya Izuku." Nezu lets out a small, dangerous smile. "For why else would he kill twenty-four heroes and villains to prevent them from coming after him?"

And with that bomb having been dropped, Toshinori finds himself wishing that he could actually drink alcohol without being rushed to the emergency room.

Aizawa Shouta is a stubborn man, Izuku finds. He's also a stubborn, *annoying* man.

So annoying, in fact, that Izuku is currently debating whether or not he should throw the paper cup filled with water he'd been given right at the hero's head.

Would it stop Aizawa from being annoying? No. Would it make Izuku feel better? Yes.

He takes a small sip of the water before placing it down on the mini table that hangs over his bed. He pushes it aside and goes back to listening to the storm raging outside. Each clap of thunder has his heart beating a little faster in his chest, and he finds himself fiddling with the sleeves of All Might's sweater almost constantly.

It's not that he's afraid of storms, it's just that they're *loud.* He would usually cuddle with Missy during times like this, or maybe even try to distract himself with work, but now he can't do any of those things, which is *also* annoying him.

Speaking of annoyances.

He glances at the hero to his right, eyes narrowing once he sees the new book Aizawa has taken to reading.

Vigilantism: Morally Wrong or Morally Required?

Okay, that's it. Izuku is *this* fucking close to losing his marbles. He's gotta be doing this on purpose now.

The boy barely refrains from outright hissing at his teacher, instead deciding to be the bigger person and ignore the obvious jab. His hands come up to itch at the fading burn on his neck, and he winces at the feeling of dead skin peeling off and gathering under his nails.

Disgusting.

Why can't Aizawa leave him alone? Just for a moment? Just so Izuku

can hightail it out of here? The hero has been sitting in that same fucking chair for an entire day now, refusing to move whatsoever. It's like he's a damn bodyguard, except instead of guarding Izuku, he's guarding the *door*.

It's dumb, it's degrading, and it makes Izuku feel like shit. To make matters worse, All Might hasn't come back yet, so obviously the boy has somehow pissed off his *other* mentor, too.

He's just one colossal fuck-up.

Izuku shakes himself and slides off the bed, needing to just do something. He pads over to the whiteboard on the wall, his fluffy socks protecting his feet from the cold floor, and stares yet again at the time written in marker at the top right.

He's going to be released soon. That's what they said, at least. He wouldn't put it past the doctors to lie to him.

The time can't come quick enough, though. The moment the clock hits eleven, he's *out of here.* He's not going to waste any more precious seconds. He's already been here for far too long. He feels *fine,* damnit. Why can't everyone see that?

"The nurse will be here soon with your lunch," Aizawa tells him, as if Izuku didn't already know that. The schedule for food is written on the board, too, for fuck's sake. He's not blind.

"I still don't know why I can't go down there myself. I can walk to the food court and back," Izuku says sourly, turning to stare at the man. Except he ends up moving a little too fast, and the world beneath him sways. Black dots corner the edges of his vision, and for a hot second he feels like he's going to pass out. But the dizziness passes quickly enough, and he blinks back to the present. "I'm literally the healthiest person alive."

Aizawa just turns a page of his book and peers at him over his frames. That's another new thing: the fact that the hero wears glasses when reading for an extended period of time. Izuku never knew that before, and he feels kind of irritated that he somehow didn't.

"Why are you up?" His teacher asks, completely ignoring the previous comments.

Izuku bristles at the tone, at the way it sounds more like a warning than a question. "To go to the bathroom. What, you think I'm going to

escape via the toilet?"

Aizawa just blinks at him, causing Izuku to flush in embarrassment. Okay, so maybe Izuku is being the annoying one.

But that doesn't matter. Aizawa shouldn't be here, and he also shouldn't be acting like he has *any* control over him, because he doesn't. Not at all. He's just his teacher—certainly not his parent.

The doctors that have been referring to him as Izuku's guardian don't know what they're talking about.

He practically flees to the bathroom, muttering an apology before shutting the door with haste. Just because he's pissed off doesn't mean he should take it out on Aizawa. Even if most of his irritation stems from the man.

Izuku washes his hands and splashes water over his face, pointedly ignoring his reflection in the mirror. He feels dirty, and he just *knows* he looks like a sewer rat now. The bathroom doesn't have an attached shower, and even if Izuku were to ask for one he doubts they'd let him use it, being a flight-risk and all. But even *if* they were to say yes...

Hell will freeze over by the time he agrees to let a stranger be present while he showers himself. That's not happening in a million years.

So Izuku wets some paper towels under the sink and wipes it over his arms and legs, trying to get the remaining dirt and soot off. It's not much, but it's the best he can do for now.

Despite trying to avoid looking in the mirror, his eyes can't help but latch onto the thin white scar on his jaw. The doctors told him it came from a piece of flying shrapnel that hit him during one of the explosions. Apparently, it had sliced his cheek quite deeply, meaning the scar will never fully fade.

He'll have to live with it, as ugly as it looks.

Izuku has never cared about his appearance before, but he knows this is going to be the only thing he sees whenever he looks at his face for months to come.

Lunch doesn't make him feel any better.

There's a tray on his bed's mini table by the time he comes out of the bathroom, and he tries to hide his disgust at the mere sight of the

food.

They give him the same thing every time: a light vegetable broth, a cup of mandarin oranges, some water, and a mystery pudding.

That sounds pretty good, in all honesty, but Izuku wouldn't know how it tastes saying as he hasn't eaten any of it.

He's just not *hungry*.

The doctors have him on nutritional pills, which are supposed to make up for his lack of eating. Those pills, plus the six other types of medications they make him take every few hours, are causing him to lose his appetite. Hell, if anything he's just more thirsty.

"The soup is good for you," Aizawa says without looking up from his phone. It seems the book will be finished at another time. "If you're not going to eat much, at least eat that."

Izuku forces himself to nod, pushing down the petulant words that ache to escape him. *Don't tell me what to do.*

It's the same conversation being repeated for the fourth time. He missed out on the hospital's breakfast yesterday for obvious reasons, but lunch and dinner went the same way. Izuku would be brought the same food, he wouldn't touch it, Aizawa would say something to him to try and get him to eat, and Izuku would ignore him.

Breakfast this morning went slightly different, however, as he did end up drinking some apple juice that Yamada snuck in for him.

The voice hero has been in and out of the hospital in the past twenty-four hours. He arrived back just after lunch yesterday with a small bag of Izuku's things, saying that he unfortunately had to confiscate some of the weapons and more incriminating stuff (he'd have to check everything in through security, after all), but Izuku didn't mind. He was more surprised that the man brought back anything at all.

Yamada stayed with him for a few hours, just talking with him and trying to get him to feel better, before having to leave to feed the cats. He also came by quickly this morning to give Aizawa a change of clothes and some books, slipping Izuku the juice box in the process.

That drink is now the one thing holding his sanity together. He will require another one soon, though, so perhaps he should look into some of the nearby grocery stores to see if they're easy to steal from.

Izuku reaches for the bag he set between the wall and the bed, pulling out his oldest notebook. He's been playing with it a lot since Yamada brought it over, more to remind himself that it's *safe,* that his secrets are safe, than out of boredom.

It's still storming like a bitch outside, so Izuku busies himself with looking through his journal and memorizing each word written in it.

Just a little longer. Just a little longer and then Izuku can get out of here—

There's a faint spike in his mind, and Izuku looks to the door just a few moments before it slams open, revealing a disheveled looking Present Mic in his hero costume.

"Good morning!" He yells, even though he'd said the exact same thing a few hours before. "How's my favorite listeners doing, huh? Good?"

"Dear god," Aizawa sighs, rubbing his temple. "We're in a hospital, Mic. Could you be any louder?"

The dark side of Izuku, the side that craves chaos and lives for pissing people off, tells him to make a joke, but the boy refrains from doing so at the last moment.

"Aw, c'mon, don't be such a grump! I've got some great news!" Yamada rears back and points double finger-guns at Izuku, grin wide. "You get to leave a little early!"

For a good few seconds, there's dead silence. Yamada stays in that position, looking back and forth between the other hero and vigilante as he waits for a response.

Well, shit, Izuku thinks, shaking himself from his stupor and beginning to pack his belongings. *You don't have to tell me twice.*

"What?" Aizawa asks, obviously skeptical.

Yamada nods excitedly. "Yep! The doc passed me on the way here!" He hands Aizawa the release papers and goes to help Izuku with his stuff, ruffling the boy's hair. "Hopefully the storm calms down for a bit so we can leave."

Izuku probably should've paid attention to the wording, as he would've been a little more alarmed at the word *we,* but he's too busy trying to reach the cat beanie Aizawa placed on one of the shelves.

Curse his five-foot-two self. He had hoped One for All would've at least helped him grow a little, but it appears not.

Yamada, the tall bastard, gets the beanie for him and then starts to politely straighten up the room.

Hah. Couldn't be Izuku.

The moment the boy has his bag in one hand and his medicine in the other, he starts to speed walk out the open door. It's not hard to navigate to the elevator, as he'd memorized the layout of the hospital when Aizawa led him back yesterday. The adrenaline pumping through him is almost like a drug.

"Woah, wait a second, kiddo!" Yamada rushes in beside him, laughing. "Someone's excited, yeah?"

Aizawa follows at a much slower pace, lugging his overnight bag over his shoulder. He looks dead tired, and Izuku suddenly feels a little bit guilty at possibly being the cause of that.

He's practically vibrating in excitement, the idea of being able to finally continue his plan and leave being almost too good to be true—or Izuku really is just going through a relapse.

The automatic doors slide open, and Izuku nearly stumbles as he jogs out of the elevator. He doesn't stop even when the lady at the front desk calls out his name, obviously having been informed of his escape yesterday. He hears Aizawa pause to show her the papers, and then he's out in the fresh air.

Heavy rain drops onto his face and skin, soaking him almost immediately to the bone, but he doesn't care. This is the first taste of freedom he's had in what feels like forever.

God, he hates hospitals *so* fucking much. They do nothing but freak him the hell out.

He glances around, deciding to go to the left. There's a store a little ways over there that's usually pretty lenient with him when he enters. They won't kick him out or—

"Hey, hey!" Yamada's warm hand gently lands on his shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. "The car's the other way!"

Izuku wipes the rain from his eyes and looks up at the hero. His

teacher's face is soft, his green gaze kind and honest, and the boy hates how it makes him feel so small. "Oh, uh, I'm fine walking, thank you. You don't have to drive me anywhere."

You've already done too much. I won't be able to repay you for just being there for me.

Yamada frowns, hand retracting from his shoulder. His glasses fog up, and Izuku notices his hair starting to droop from the constant thrum of rain. The gel must be coming off.

"Drive you anywhere?" He echoes, blinking in confusion. "Did Sho not tell you, kiddo?"

Izuku tenses as lightning cracks somewhere in the distance. "Tell me what?"

Yamada doesn't seem to get it at first, but then his face lights up in realization, and he whips around to glare at Aizawa, who's just now walking up to them with a yellow umbrella. "I can't believe it!" He gasps, shocked. "The *nerve* of you, Shouta! You said you'd tell him!"

The underground hero raises his hands in mock surrender, his even gaze flitting over to meet Izuku's. "I told you I'd tell him eventually, Mic. I never said when."

"Are you *serious?"*

Izuku listens to them both argue for a moment, incredibly confused. He thinks he knows what's going on, but he's still unsure. Now that they're both distracted, though, the boy sees his chance and decides *screw it,* why not? He tries to casually walk away, hoping they won't notice, but Aizawa's hand shoots out and snags him by the collar of the shirt. He easily pulls him back without so much as a pause in his sentence.

Fuck. So much for that.

The air is getting colder now, and Izuku starts to shiver. He can hardly think past the static building up in his mind.

Yamada seems to notice Izuku's change in attitude, as he stops laying into Aizawa at once and glances back at him, seeing that he has more pressing issues at the moment. He purses his lips and presents Izuku with a small smile. "Well, I guess I'm telling you, then, huh? You're coming back with us, Midoriya. To our house!"

Yeah, that's... not what Izuku thought he was going to say, that's for sure. "Eh?" He says intelligently, because what the fuck.

Is it April Fool's Day and he just wasn't informed? Should he be laughing right now?

Yamada takes the heavier bag from his grip and rests a hand on the boy's head. "How do you feel about coming to stay with me and Sho for a few weeks?"

Yeah, Izuku has decided that he doesn't get paid enough to deal with this shit.

Yamada is a better driver than Aizawa.

Izuku's pencil, courtesy of the voice hero, scrawls the sentence quickly onto the paper of his notebook. This little fact became evident about 0.2 seconds into the current drive.

Where Aizawa is jerky and either too-slow or too-fast, Yamada is smooth and obviously familiar with the speed limits around here. He actually seems like he *knows* how to drive.

He's also a good multitasker. It's surprising how many people can't talk correctly while driving, but Yamada does it normally.

The teacher made it very clear that this is Izuku's decision alone. They're not going to force him to do anything or choose anything permanent just yet, as that's not their intention. They just want the best for him, which is why they offered to house him in the first place.

And it's baffling. Izuku doesn't understand why. He doesn't understand why they're doing any of this. It's weird, it's warm, and it's too kind. They're not getting anything out of this, so why go through all this trouble? It doesn't make *sense,* damnit.

Yamada said that he unfortunately only has two choices at the

moment: the orphanage, or their shared apartment. He seemed very upset when Izuku asked him about the only other option—jail, so Izuku made a note to himself not to bring that up again.

It's nice, Izuku thinks absentmindedly, that he even bothered to explain all of this to him. The hero truly doesn't want to make Izuku uncomfortable or force him into anything he doesn't want to do, which is different.

Not a lot of people ever cared this much for him. It's an almost foreign feeling.

Izuku is glad that he'd been given a choice, even though the answer was pretty obvious. Going to an orphanage means he'd have to leave all of his stuff behind, as they surely wouldn't let him keep any of his belongings. It also means he'd be putting more innocent people in danger, which is a no-go. Besides, he knows how terrible orphanages can be. The foster care system is even worse.

Even if he managed to escape, he knows that someone would be watching him, and then he'd be captured and the cycle would start over again.

Going with Yamada and Aizawa isn't much better, but at least they already know a lot about him. They know about him being Rabbit, they know about some of his personal life, they know about *Midoriya Izuku.*

Going to an orphanage would mean a restart, almost, and just a few days ago Izuku thought that a restart was necessary for his survival.

But maybe not. Maybe now that his secrets have been revealed he can just hang in there for a while and gather his thoughts. Maybe he can hit the pause button for a moment, if only to catch his breath. So much stuff has happened that he can barely wrap his head around it.

Would he... would he be allowed to have this?

Izuku stares up at his teachers' apartment complex through the windshield, heart thudding almost painfully against his ribs. His nerves are struck, and he's feeling more unsure now more than ever.

What made him say yes again? He doesn't remember.

Yamada turns off the ignition and gives Izuku another considering look. "Are you sure you're alright?"

The vigilante (ex-vigilante, now?) nods shakily, opening the passenger side door quickly as if to prove his point. Aizawa emerges from the backseat, having been banished there for apparently being mean to Yamada, and leads the boy up to the apartment without a word.

Izuku can't help but stick close to Aizawa as they walk. The two heroes live on the sixth floor, so that's nice, at least. Izuku likes being up high.

The green-haired boy shivers when they finally make it up, drops of rain still clinging to him. He felt bad about getting in the car while still wet, but Yamada had assured him it was fine.

Aizawa unlocks the door and pushes it open, gesturing for Izuku to go in first—the wrong move, honestly.

He stops just a few steps in, eyes wide as he takes in the apartment before him, only to yelp as Aizawa practically shoves him forward in order to close the door in time. Izuku sees why once he spots the three furry figures darting forward from various areas in the room.

Izuku has seen so many pictures of these cats that he could probably pick them out by name, and he stops himself from bending down to pet one of them. He doesn't want to scare any of them off. He's the guest here, after all.

The apartment is nice, to put it simply. It's larger than Izuku's was, with much nicer furniture and air conditioning, along with what looks like a newly remodeled kitchen. It's clean, homely, and altogether a very expensive-looking apartment.

To say Izuku is surprised is an understatement. He never thought Aizawa would bother to live somewhere like this. He'd expected a smaller apartment, at least. But then again, *Yamada* also lives here, so that explains it. A bold house to go with a bold hero.

"Don't mind the cats!" The blond calls from the kitchen. He's rummaging through the cabinets for something. "They're a little shy at first."

They certainly don't seem shy, Izuku thinks, looking down at the fluffy gray cat rubbing at the sweatpants the hospital gave him. He keeps quiet, though.

"You can move around, you know," Aizawa says, heading for the couch. "Leave your shoes by the door. There's an extra pair of slippers

right there you can use for now."

He points to them, and Izuku nods. They're gray, and they look pretty big, but it's fine. He won't be staying for long anyway.

"Oh! Let me show you where you'll be sleeping!" Yamada springs from the kitchen and heads down the hall, beckoning Izuku to come after him. The boy does so with some hesitancy, trying not to trip over the calico cat that starts to do figure-eights around his feet. "This used to be the guest room, but it'll be yours now! I know it's a little plain, so don't be afraid to put up some posters or anything, 'kay?"

Izuku clears his throat and nods again, stepping inside the room to put down his bag. He tries not to show his awe at just how big it is compared to his old one but ultimately fails, causing Yamada to giggle.

"I'll leave you to settle in for a few minutes, and then I'll take you for a house tour! How does that sound?"

A house tour? Izuku doesn't know what that could possibly entail, but it's not like there's much else to do, so why not? "Um, yeah, that's good." He stands in the middle of the room awkwardly until Yamada shuts the door with a soft *click,* one of the cats meowing in protest.

Hm. It seems they kind of like him.

Izuku sits on the full-sized bed, head held in his hands now that he's alone. Things still don't feel real to him. He can't believe he's here right now, sitting in his teachers' apartment instead of being chained up in a prison somewhere.

This is better than he could have ever hoped for, but this is also the worst thing that could've *ever* happened to him. It's interesting how things end up, isn't it?

Izuku stares at the framed cat pictures scattered on the dresser, sighing to himself.

Just for a little while, he promises. He can stay just long enough to get himself together. Then he'll run, for good this time. He won't fail.

That's how it has to be.

Chapter End Notes

outrunning karma, that boy.

this chapter inspired by this song on youtube.
i

somewhere i belong

Chapter Notes

(warnings: implied/referenced child abuse, eating problems)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku doesn't know what he expected, in all honesty.

The Aizawa and Yamada household is fairly plain, if not a little chaotic. There are two bedrooms, one small office space that Yamada uses as his at-home studio, and two bathrooms, making this one of the *biggest* places Izuku has ever stayed at, despite it being only an apartment.

Which is weird, unusual, and maybe a little uncomfortable, though not bad.

Not bad *yet.*

Yamada is very enthusiastic while showing Izuku around, looking almost giddy when he opens the door to his studio and starts to explain what each piece of equipment is used for. Izuku doesn't have to pretend that he's excited, as he knows that the stuff in this office alone is probably worth more than all of his old support weapons put together. The hero promises to take him to the actual studio sometime soon, and honestly? He's *ecstatic* about that idea.

But his okay-ish mood quickly dampens after the tour ends, and now he's standing around, arms wrapped around his middle as he tries to think of something to do. Something that won't, preferably, make him look more out of place than he already feels.

Rarely has he ever been given the chance to just wait around and do nothing. The feeling is abnormal, and he doesn't like it one bit. His muscles twitch and ache with the need to just *move* and *stretch.* He needs something to do, or else he's going to keel over and *die.*

And it's not like he has a phone right now either. Usually he'd be searching for more jobs or clients online and be browsing public forums for hero and villain information, but none of those are options at the moment. He's definitely not going to ask Yamada or Aizawa for one of their phones to use, as that'd be… rude. He's a guest here. This isn't his home. Asking for something like that would be impolite and

entitled.

He also can't even distract himself with unpacking because he doesn't *have* anything to unpack. He doesn't have any clothes or weapons or electronics—nothing. All of his old belongings are gone now. Mere piles of ash sitting on splintered wood.

Izuku is lucky that Aizawa apparently has a ton of spare clothes. The man doesn't even wear more than two outfits, so Izuku is trying not to feel *too* guilty right now about having to wear his stuff. Most of it is too small for the other anyway, but still.

He knows that it's either *this* or the couple will spend their money to buy him *new* clothes, which is a *big* fucking nope.

It's only been a couple of days since the incident and he's acting jittery. He can feel his quirks pulsing in his mind in the form of a mild headache, his powers simultaneously trying to fight off the drugs in his system and succumb to them. It's like a war going on inside his body—inside his *mind,* and it's not pleasant at all.

Dammit. Izuku is already contemplating jumping out of the window and it's only been a few hours since arriving here. *It's just six stories,* he assures himself. *I've survived falling from worse heights before.*

He shudders at the sudden reminder of The Helicopter Fiasco. It was fun in the moment, sure, but he'd rather not have a repeat of that.

Something headbutts his leg, jolting him out of his thoughts, and Izuku glances down to see the cats once again crowding around him, tails held high.

Huh. They don't seem to be capable of leaving him alone.

The fluffy gray one with green eyes claws up his pants and forces herself into his arms, meowing incessantly. *Pickles,* his mind helpfully supplies, and he tilts his head down to kiss her head on impulse. The cat surprisingly lets it happen, but not without swatting his cheek first.

Meatball headbutts his leg one last time before slinking away into the kitchen, rumbling quietly. Izuku watches the calico disappear around the corner, only to look back down and meet the very unnerving gaze of Sushi, who's sitting with his paws tucked politely under his tail a few steps in front of Izuku. And it's the eyes that catch him off guard.

They remind Izuku of Missy's eyes, of the way they seem to stare straight into his soul. As if, despite being just an animal, Sushi can *understand.*

Izuku crouches down and reaches out a hand, ignoring Pickles' noise of protest at being jostled. Sushi just stares, unimpressed, as the boy slowly goes to scratch behind tan ears. The light brown tabby leans into the touch, the tip of his tail swishing back and forth across the carpet, but otherwise he doesn't make a move to let Izuku know whether or not to stop.

They won't stop following him. Every few minutes they'll traipse back over to Izuku and demand for attention and pets—all except Sushi. The quiet cat in front of him is obviously much older than the other two, probably being at around Izuku's age, and is much gentler.

Yamada said this is Kayama-sensei's cat, right? He must spend a lot of time here because of how many missions Midnight takes.

Izuku doesn't mind them constantly coming over to him. He just doesn't understand *why* they're doing that. Cats aren't usually like that, especially when it comes to strangers. Though the boy guesses he shouldn't be too surprised; that's how he got Missy, after all.

The feline wouldn't stop following him that night either, and honestly it feels more like *she* chose *Izuku* rather than the other way around.

"They seem to like you," Aizawa says, and Izuku tenses despite himself.

He glances up to look at the teacher from his place at the mouth of the hallway, petting Pickles a little faster as his nerves start to spike. Aizawa is on the couch with his reading glasses on and a laptop balanced on his knees, the light from the screen reflecting off his frames and stopping Izuku from meeting his eyes. Which is good. Izuku doesn't want to do that anyway.

Aizawa isn't actually looking at him, which gives Izuku a free chance to just observe the man without being weird. He doesn't look irritated anymore, Izuku thinks, noting the unusual softness to his features. But that might also be just because he's concentrating on whatever he's working on. His teacher is a stealth hero, a damn good one at that, so he could very well be simply masking his emotions with a blank expression to prevent Izuku from reading him. It's not like he hasn't done that before.

Hell, it's not like *Izuku* hasn't done that before.

He suddenly gets the urge to tell Aizawa that he looks like a grandma with those reading glasses, but he manages to stop himself in the nick of time. That would be mean. And plus, Yamada is just a little ways away in the kitchen, rummaging around in the cabinets to try and get an early start on dinner.

Izuku knows he would most likely laugh at the jab and not get upset on behalf of his friend, but the boy also doesn't want to run the risk of that *not* happening.

So Izuku just nods at Aizawa's statement and continues playing with Pickles, allowing the cat to gnaw on his fingers and bat at his hand. Sushi goes into the kitchen too, probably to go see Yamada, and then it's just the three of them in the living room: Izuku, Aizawa, and Pickles.

Entertaining himself with a cat only works for so long. It's an almost mindless action, so it's not even doing much of anything to keep his brain stimulated. He's just getting increasingly bored, and with that boredom comes frustration.

He can't *do* anything. He really wants to go outside, but he kind of doubts Aizawa would let him out right now without tagging along. Not so soon after getting out of the hospital, at least. He's still very much in the healing process, however much he doesn't feel like it or pretends not to be.

But what control does Aizawa even have over him? Legally speaking, he has none. Just because he's his homeroom teacher doesn't mean anything. So what's stopping Izuku from just walking out the front door and doing what he wants? Nothing. It just feels like something Izuku wouldn't be *allowed* to do right now, even though Aizawa hasn't explicitly said anything against it.

Izuku could walk out. He honestly could. But that would probably only annoy Aizawa, or at the very least minorly inconvenience him, and he doesn't want to do that just yet.

But more than that, Izuku just doesn't want to do anything that might disappoint *Yamada.* The boy has seen a few of his classmates receive *the eyebrows of disappointment* from the voice hero on multiple occasions, and Izuku thinks he'd just about burst into tears if he had to be on the receiving end of one of those looks.

This is why he can't afford to let that bubbling frustration give way inside him and make him do something rude, so he forces himself to do one of the only things he's good at; he asks questions.

Izuku clears his throat, hoping he doesn't sound as unsure as he feels when he speaks. "Aizawa-sensei?"

The clacking of the keyboard slows down slightly. "It's just Aizawa here," the man corrects, still not looking up from his work.

Okay, Just Aizawa.

Izuku has to stop himself from saying this and instead takes the answer as a sign to continue. "When will I be able to see Missy? She's still at the vet's, right?"

"Yes. They said they're just watching over her for now to check for any lasting injuries, but she should be fine." Aizawa checks his phone briefly. "She'll be ready to be picked up tomorrow."

Tomorrow. Which means he has to wait *another* day to see her.

And while it's honestly not a long wait, it sure feels like it. Today has already gone by so slow that he doesn't even want to imagine what the next few days will feel like.

An idea pops into his head. A dumb, small idea, but an idea nonetheless. It's more like a test, because if he's going to be here for a bit he might as well figure out the boundary lines.

Izuku keeps his gaze on Pickles, making sure he sounds neutral. "Can I be the one to pick her up? I know where the office is; I can walk there."

This time Aizawa does stop at the question. The keyboard stops clacking, and the sound of pots and pans clanging together in the kitchen stops abruptly as well, if only for a moment. *Shit. Both the wrong and the right thing to ask, then.*

Izuku feels Aizawa's eyes on him now but doesn't look up, instead focusing on scratching behind the cat's ears. It's not a true test if there's not first an answer to the question, and Izuku is simply waiting for Aizawa to respond now. Whether or not the response will be right is a whole 'nother matter entirely.

The pause stretches on, and then Izuku hears the laptop being shut,

making his throat tighten. *Okay. Maybe I should have waited.*

"Mic is going to pick her up after work tomorrow," Aizawa says simply, eyes still on him. He must be searching for a reaction just as much as Izuku is.

That's a nice way of saying no, Izuku thinks. He frowns down at Pickles, curbing his own rising panic. The commotion starts back up in the kitchen, and Izuku forces himself to breathe.

"Oh." His nails bite into his palms on instinct. That seems to be something he's done a lot lately. "Can I go with him?"

Aizawa shifts on the couch. "You won't be going to school tomorrow, kid, and he's going to get her straight after."

It's the first part that makes Izuku's head snap up. "I won't be going to school?"

The black-haired man tilts his head, scratching the stubble on his jaw in a way that would make him seem unperturbed if Izuku didn't know any better. "The doctors ordered you to rest. Nezu and I came to an agreement that you'd be excused from school for a week in order to give you enough time to heal. I'll be staying with you during that time just in case you have any reactions to the medicine."

That is complete and utter *bullshit,* Izuku wants to scream. And what does he mean by *just in case?* Izuku isn't going to keel over and die tomorrow, so he doesn't need a caretaker! Well, actually there is a chance he might die at any given moment, but that's *not the point!*

It's stupidly obvious to Izuku that Aizawa just wants to keep an eye on him, probably to make sure he doesn't try to escape again—a valid reason, in all honesty, though it's not like Izuku will ever admit that.

A week inside this place, where he'll have nothing to do or no one but Aizawa to talk to for most of the day? A whole *week?* That sounds like hell. And not the fun kind.

Izuku regrets not throwing his water cup at the man. He didn't deserve it then but he definitely does now.

What will Kacchan think once he sees me not at school? I don't even have my phone to text or call him, so he might just assume I'm dead.

The explosive teen assuming something like *that* wouldn't be good for

anybody involved.

Izuku stares at Aizawa, trying to see if he can find a crack in his expression or something that he can latch onto and use as leverage. “You’re going to miss school for a week, too?” He asks, a little confused and also affronted. “But you *never* miss any workdays, even when you’re sick. That would ruin your record.”

Aizawa quirks a brow. “I think I’ll survive.”

No! That’s not—that’s not right. That’s not what you’re supposed to say. You’ve always made a big deal out of not skipping out on work for pointless reasons, so why are you doing this now? For me?

It feels wrong. And Izuku knows it probably isn’t meant this way, but it feels *degrading,* too. It’s like Aizawa doesn’t trust him enough to leave him alone for a few hours without doing something rash—and again, he shouldn’t, but it’s the *principle* of it.

Great. So he has to wait until tomorrow to see his cat, and he also probably won’t be allowed out without a good reason for an extended period of time. It’s only been a few hours and he already feels like a damn prisoner despite Yamada’s earlier reassurances on the car ride over that he isn’t.

This isn’t fair. None of it is.

Izuku stands up and heads for the kitchen, letting Pickles drop to the floor. He doesn’t want to be in Aizawa’s presence, even though he knows that *technically* this isn’t all his fault. If the roles were reversed Izuku would probably treat himself the same way.

Yamada is stirring something in a pot, swaying to a tune that no one else can hear, and Izuku makes sure to stay far out of his way. The food smells delicious, and though he doesn’t think he’ll be able to eat any of it, that doesn’t mean he’s going to distract him. He has a pretty good idea of what he’s preparing, and his hands itch to help because he *knows* how to make this dish; he’s made this with Mitsuki so many times that’s it practically second nature at this point—but he stops himself from even asking.

If he wanted my help, he’d ask.

Izuku leans awkwardly against the counter, eyes roaming over the kitchen. He takes in the bowl of fruit that sits near the microwave, the toaster that looks like it’s been on fire more than once, and the very

expensive-looking coffee machine that takes up nearly a quarter of the counter space in front of him. The fridge matches the other appliances, and Izuku is just able to see his reflection in the black stainless steel.

There are a ton of cabinets, but what's more important to note is the stuff that might be in the drawers, and, more specifically, the stuff he might be able to use in the future.

He watches how Yamada spins around to grab a knife from one of the drawers closest to the dishwasher—the utensils drawer, Izuku notices—and starts to dice up an onion. The bigger knives, used for cutting meats and thicker vegetables, are hanging on the wall next to him. They're pretty high up, though, probably so the cats will have a harder time reaching them, but what this also means is that Izuku will have to stand on his tiptoes to get one if he'll ever need to.

It's done subconsciously, the way he scans the area and files away any potentially important information. He can't exactly help it, and yet he doesn't stop at all when he realizes he's doing it.

The light catches on a few pictures on the fridge, and Izuku moves forward to inspect them once Yamada gets distracted by one of the cats getting too close to the pot.

Are these…?

Izuku's eyes widen slightly when he sees what exactly the pictures are. Some of them are snapshots of a slightly younger Yamada and Aizawa at what looks to be a variety of parties, arms slung around each other with differing outfits in each one. Aizawa looks like he can't be bothered, but Izuku doesn't miss the small quirk of his lips that's present in almost every photo.

A baby Pickles and Meatball are also shown together, wrapped up in a thick blanket with a card reading *six weeks* leaning against them. They must've been siblings.

But it's the picture on the top corner of the fridge door that has a small gasp leaving him, because *oh.*

He notices Yamada first—the man is wearing a crisp white suit, his hair done in an intricate braid with a flower crown hanging half off his head. Aizawa is right next to him with a similar outfit, mouth open in a laugh while the sun shines brightly behind them both, and if Izuku's eyesight is correct, it looks like he's *crying?*

Oh. This is from their wedding, it looks like. The date on the bottom of the picture says this was eight years ago, which would put Yamada and Aizawa both at around twenty-four in this picture.

The pieces fit together perfectly now. So they're *definitely* husbands. In a way, Izuku has always known. It was just something about the way they talked about each other that clued him in. He remembers how they would sometimes mention their 'partner' around him. He remembers how Yamada's eyes would light up when he talked about him on those rare occasions at the laundromat, how his face would always soften considerably. On patrols, he remembers how Aizawa would get quiet after Izuku teasingly asked for the hundredth time about his love life. The man usually wouldn't talk on the subject for long, but there was always that same glint to his eye that Yamada would have.

There was a moment at the laundromat a few months in where Yamada got a call from this *partner,* and Izuku had made sure to keep extra quiet so as not to disturb him. He realized pretty quickly that the person on the other end was someone important, because just *hearing* how Yamada talked to them was very different than how he normally acts as Present Mic. And coincidentally, the next day Izuku met up with Eraserhead and listened to the man talk about a very *similar* conversation that he had had with his own significant other.

At that time the boy said nothing about his suspicions, and now he's glad to see that his instincts were correct.

It's kind of obvious, actually. At first glance, Yamada and Aizawa are polar opposites; two halves of a whole. It's only right that they ended up together.

They both look so *happy* in this picture that Izuku has to take a step back, heart squeezing almost painfully in his chest. He probably shouldn't be seeing this, and yet when he turns around he finds that Yamada is staring at the photo too, something like fondness on his face.

"You don't seem very surprised," the hero says, tearing his eyes away and turning back to finish up the dinner behind him. He sounds just a little uncertain, and Izuku realizes that he's probably waiting to hear his response.

Izuku flushes, looking down at his feet. "That's because I kind of already knew."

“Oh?” Yamada shoos away a lingering Pickles and starts to make plates. “How?”

Oh, crap. I’m gonna come off as a total fucking weirdo.

“Um, Aizawa-sensei would talk about a partner sometimes on patrol, and you talked about one, too? And sometimes the things you’d both say would just… match up.” Izuku fiddles with the hem of the baggy black shirt he has on, hoping that that makes sense.

“Ah, gotcha. I can definitely see that.” Yamada shakes his head with a smile before twisting to point a large spoon at him. “Oh, and like Sho said, you can drop the formalities at home, kiddo. No need to call us sensei here.”

So then what are you? Izuku wants to ask, following Yamada awkwardly out into the dining area as the man puts down the plates. *Are you a teacher here, or just a hero? What are you to me now?*

He’s not going to call them by his hero names, and he’s apparently not supposed to call them sensei now, so what does he refer to them as? *Just* Aizawa and Yamada? It doesn’t sound right for some reason.

The voice hero calls Aizawa over and gestures for Izuku to sit down. He does, but only after the other two have been seated. Yamada takes the one at the head of the table, and Aizawa sits right next to him on the longer side. Izuku takes the spot as far away from the two as possible, avoiding sitting at the other end spot—that’s reserved for people of authority, and while Izuku knows that this practice is long-forgotten in most households nowadays, he can’t help but follow it.

He sits as far away from them as possible, which isn’t that far, all things considered. He’s sitting diagonal to Aizawa on the other side of the table, and when his plate is slid toward him, Izuku mutters out a quiet thanks.

Izuku watches them say a quick prayer before digging in, but he just sits there and… stares at his food. He doesn’t know what to do. He hasn’t had a home-cooked meal in a good bit of time. He hasn’t been to the Bakugou’s in weeks, and nor has he visited Ms. Hanako.

And in this unfamiliar house, everything feels just that much weirder.

He stares down at his plate. It looks good, in all honesty. *Amazing,* actually, but he’s just not hungry.

He didn't eat much of anything at the hospital either. It's not like it matters though, right? The medication he's taking is supposed to help with that. And besides, over the last month or so he's stopped being such a heavy eater. He thinks faintly that it might be his body's way of punishing him for accepting One for All, and he quickly pushes that thought aside for another time.

"He didn't poison it," Aizawa deadpans suddenly. Izuku glances up and finds his teacher staring at him. He's already started digging in but seems to have paused upon noticing Izuku's hesitance.

Yamada is frowning at him, too, looking concerned, and Izuku shifts uncomfortably. He realizes he's probably being impolite by not eating, but he also feels like it'll be *more* impolite to only eat a few bites and leave it at that. That might make it look like he thinks it's disgusting.

"I know!" He says, more to himself than anything. *If he wanted to poison me, he would've used a different method. And besides, I was standing there the whole time. I would've seen it.*

He wouldn't poison him anyway, though, Izuku knows, which is why he hates himself for even thinking that. For even making *sure* that he wouldn't.

He picks up the chopsticks in front of him—a nice, sleek black set—and picks around at the food. If he moves it around it'll look like he's eating it.

Well, that's what he thought.

"You need to get your strength back up," Aizawa orders, seeing right through his bullshit. "Eat."

"But I'm fine," he says quietly, and he is. He's lived like this for a long time. Sure, he's been forgetting to eat anything that isn't school lunch for the past month or so, but he's still fine. It's worked for him so far. "And I had breakfast this morning," he adds lamely.

Aizawa takes a bite of food and points his chopsticks at him, reminding Izuku yet again that the man *chooses* to have bad manners. "You didn't eat any of your breakfast at the hospital, Midoriya. I would know because I was there."

The raven-haired man makes to speak again, but Yamada beats him to it. "Even if you had something to eat then, that was over twelve hours ago, kiddo. I know you must be hungry." He stares at Izuku, who's

very pointedly keeping his gaze on his plate, and straightens up. “Do you not like it? I can make something else—?”

“No!” He flushes at his outburst, dipping his head to hide his face once more. “It’s fine. It looks good, sir, really. I just don’t think I’ll be able to keep it down.” He says the last part in a whisper, embarrassed.

Everyone waits a few seconds, and then—

“If you’re really not hungry, you can wrap it up and put it in the microwave in case you change your mind in the next few hours.”

Izuku blinks up at Aizawa, surprised and also grateful at being let off so easily.

“But you’ll have to eat something soon,” he continues. Izuku quickly rises to his feet with his plate to escape the situation. “The issue is you feel sick because you haven’t eaten, and now you’re not eating *because* you feel sick.”

Yeah, that makes a little bit of sense, he guesses. But he can barely stomach the thought of eating at this moment. Can barely stomach the thought of taking what he doesn’t deserve. Eating at Tony’s Pizzeria was different. He would either work or pay upfront for his food, despite Ms. Hanako’s complaints. And at the Bakugou household he would help Kacchan with studying and training, so then he would at least feel like he was earning the food.

This food, however, is being given to him for free. And here he is, *wasting* it.

Yamada probably feels like shit now, and it’s that guilt-inducing thought that has Izuku heading further into the kitchen and to the sink after placing his food in the microwave. He starts to wash the prepping materials and pots by hand, if only to give himself something to do and think about other than the pressing issues at hand.

He hears Yamada move quickly from the table, about to stop him, but then Aizawa says something low to him and the footsteps never come.

Izuku is grateful for it. Perhaps Aizawa understands how he’s feeling right now. Izuku needs to at least do this if he’s going to be here, as dumb as it sounds.

This is just something he needs to do for himself.

By the time he's done, Aizawa and Yamada seem to have finished up dinner, and the latter comes back into the kitchen with both dirty plates. Izuku is prepared to take them, but Yamada just puts them in the empty dishwasher with a smile.

He places a hand on his shoulder as he walks past, and the boy marvels at how easily the man can just move around him as if Izuku belongs. As if he's *supposed* to be there.

"We usually use the dishwasher," the blond teases lightly, heading for the living room. "It's faster, y'know?"

Izuku stands there hesitantly for a moment before following him out of the kitchen. But instead of going to the couch to join them in whatever they're watching, he pauses by the hallway entrance, feeling the need to justify what he's doing. "Thank you for making dinner," he says, just loud enough for them to hear him. *Even if I didn't eat it.* "I'm going to, uh, go to the guest room now?"

Are you telling or are you asking?

Yamada smiles widely at him, flashing a thumbs-up. "'Course, kiddo! Get some rest, and don't forget to take your meds tonight, yeah?"

"You didn't sleep at all last night either," Aizawa adds, already back to what he's working on. "So make sure you do it now. You'll heal faster that way."

Can one respectively decline that?

Just ten seconds later, Izuku is glaring at the bed in front of him.

He knows he won't be able to sleep, but he tries for it anyway. He flops onto his back and stares up at the dark ceiling, willing himself to go to sleep. Praying.

Last night at the hospital was similar to this. Except then Izuku didn't even try to sleep. He couldn't try, for that was an unfamiliar, dangerous place. Sleeping means vulnerability, especially at night. He just couldn't do that so soon.

Aizawa must've known this, for he didn't push too much. He even stayed up with him, offering Izuku his phone for a minute to play this really cool Flappy Bird game—and oh, what Izuku would give to be

playing it right now.

The bed here is too soft and the walls too plain. It doesn't feel like his room because it *isn't*.

Izuku would usually sleep on the floor or couch at his old apartment, which means he's used to having much harder beds than most people. This bed right here is like a cloud—no, a marshmallow compared to his old ones. It's too good to be true, too wrong to ever be for him.

So Izuku tries his hardest, but he just can't sleep. He twists and turns on the bed, growling in frustration. It isn't until the moon is high up in the sky that there's shuffling under his door, and he immediately sits up. A paw shoots out from under the crack and starts to wave around, making Izuku squint his eyes to see it better and then let out a giggle.

Izuku would have been keen on just watching it happen, that is until a slight yowl came from the other side. He immediately scrambles to his feet to open the door, quickly glancing at the door that he knows leads to Aizawa and Yamada's bedroom. Has he woken them up?

He extends his senses and finds that both of their quirks feel very subdued. Yamada is definitely asleep, but what about Aizawa? Erasure is weird when it comes to Izuku sensing it. He could very well be awake but just be relaxed enough to throw Izuku's quirk off.

The cat shoves past his legs and makes himself at home on the guest bed, which is entirely amusing to Izuku. There isn't a lot of light, but he thinks that this one is Sushi, meaning that this is the first time he's heard the cat voice himself. He lays down, huffing when Sushi goes to lay across his chest and cuddle up to him.

He stays like that, just staring up at the ceiling and gently petting Sushi while thinking about a ton of different things, until the sun's first rays are streaking through his curtains. The window (which is reinforced with a ton of locks, the boy thinks amusedly) sits right to the side of Izuku, so the light shines right on his face. At this point he can hear Aizawa and Yamada moving around, but he stays there for a bit longer, trying not to be suspicious.

What he's thinking about right now is *Tsukauchi*.

He wants to see him. *Needs* to see him. It's been way too long, honestly. There are so many things he needs to talk to the detective about. Izuku thinks that along with All Might, it's going to be hard to

talk with Tsukauchi—not only because he is a literal lie detector, but because he's the one who's known him the longest. He was always there for him, both when he was Rabbit and just Midoriya Izuku.

He was the *first* person who kind of believed in him. Izuku knows he must be busy with work, but surely he would've been informed of Izuku's situation? At least by Aizawa?

Izuku also hates how desperate he is for some kind of reassurance from him. He's a detective, so if *he* says things are okay, it has to be true. That's point blank. That's who Tsukauchi is.

But what if the problem *is* Izuku? What if it really is his own fault that he's being ignored by his other two idols? He wouldn't be surprised. He'd be *more* surprised otherwise, actually.

Sushi whacks him with a paw, bringing him out of his thoughts, and Izuku sighs to himself. "Get used to it," he mutters. "I do this a lot. Trust me, I'm not proud of it."

It's a common occurrence to think these things. It's common to always worry.

For anxiety is always feeling like something's out of place, and when you can't find what it is, you start to think it's you.

Yamada is hurriedly making breakfast by the time he deems it safe to walk out into the main room, steps deadly silent on instinct. The voice hero has his costume on and his hair gelled up, still packing things up for work, but Aizawa still has his pajamas on and looks to be more relaxed on the couch. *I guess he really is staying here to watch me.*

The boy doesn't know what to do with that information. He doesn't like what that means.

Prisoner, a voice hisses at the back of his mind, and for once Izuku agrees.

Yamada slides him a small plate, as Aizawa is already eating by his spot on the couch, but he assures Izuku that he doesn't have to finish it if he doesn't want to. He also says, however, that there's a little more in the pan in case he wants *more*.

It's kind of funny how he's going to be disappointed.

Yamada ruffles Izuku's hair quickly as he passes, promising to see if he can get him some better clothes from the lost and found at UA for now until they can get him some of his own stuff. The boy just looks back down at his plate, nodding his head as he hears Yamada kiss Aizawa goodbye despite the other's protest.

And then he walks out, and they're left alone.

Which is… okay. Izuku has been alone with Aizawa loads of times. They're both comfortable in silence, as usually it's not quite as awkward as it is now, but this time it's one hundred percent Izuku's fault for making it feel like this.

He's hiding so many fucking things from this man that now that he's this close to him, *literally,* he feels as though he might explode. Lying to Aizawa is, again, always the hardest.

He only manages to get down two bites of breakfast before pushing it off to the side. It's better than what Aizawa thought he'd eat, obviously, as Izuku can hear his intrigued *hmph* from behind him. Good. Does that mean Aizawa approves? Is he doing alright?

Izuku really, really hopes so.

The day goes by agonizingly slow, just as he predicted. He keeps glancing periodically at the clock, only to get even more annoyed when it just seems like it's going backwards. He just *knows* that this week is going to suck.

He feels like shit, and there's also nothing to do. He's sure as hell not going to go nap, either. His mind wouldn't let him do that.

Izuku needs to text Kacchan sometime. He'll be worried sick by now, as Izuku usually tells him if he can't make it somewhere beforehand. The other issue, however, is that All Might still hasn't contacted him. To be fair he doesn't *have* his old phone, so none of his potential calls or texts would reach him anyway, but Izuku had assumed he would know about that. Wouldn't he know that he's staying with Aizawa and Yamada for a bit? Couldn't he just call Aizawa or someone to get to

him?

Or is Izuku not worth that effort?

But still. He—he has to ask. Izuku has to know anyway. That's how he convinces himself to ask this next question, anyway.

Izuku is nervously walking around the living room now, eyes continuously latching onto the door and window. "Aizawa?" He gets a hum in affirmation. "Do you know where my phone is? I think I had it on me after I got home."

Aizawa nods from his place at the couch, not looking up from his computer yet. He's been glued to that a lot lately, it seems. "Tsukauchi has it."

And just *what the fuck?* The name makes Izuku reel back, eyes wide. "What? How does *he* have it? I haven't even seen him!"

"I sent it over at his request after the doctors gave it to me." He says it casually, as if it really is that simple. As if it's not a big deal at all.

You bastard, Izuku thinks, a little hurt. *Why would you do that? Why?*

Aizawa must notice the look on his face because he continues with a sigh. "I apologize for not telling you sooner, kid, but he needed it for evidence. He wanted to see if we could find footage or any information on it regarding that night, but he said he came up with nothing. He's just holding onto it for now until he can come over here himself."

Evidence. They took his phone away for *evidence?* Are they serious?

Petulance makes its way into his voice as he speaks, and he turns away sourly. "You could've asked me," he says quietly, hating how the words sound close to a whine. "I would've answered your questions or just given it to you."

You didn't have to steal my phone and snoop through my shit. Did Tsukauchi look through my contacts, too? Fuck.

"We didn't have much of a choice at the time, Midoriya. You were still unconscious." Aizawa grabs his laptop and gets up, ignoring Izuku's incredulous look as he heads for the dining table and sits down with one leg propped over the other. He gestures with a hand at the chair on the far side—the head spot, he notices. "And speaking of questions.

Have a seat, please."

Oh. Double fuck. Izuku should've never said anything. He suddenly feels like a deer caught in headlights, and he blinks twice at the man as if to check if he's actually *asking* and not ordering. Is he going to be interrogated or something? Is that what this is? Was the hero just waiting for Izuku to bring it up first?

Aizawa rolls his eyes. "Calm down. I just have three questions, kid."

Only three? That doesn't feel right.

Izuku doesn't move at first, as he's too busy trying to calm the rapid beating of his heart, but Aizawa just waits patiently until he makes his way over and slides into the chair that's *not* at the head of the table, palms sweating. He knows, logically, that he'll be fine, but it's just *hard* not to be worried. It's hard to come to terms with the fact that maybe he doesn't always have to be on edge.

He shouldn't be on edge. Not right now. Aizawa is here, and that has to be enough. He's never let him down before, right?

"The group that followed you. There were twenty-four of them." Aizawa's dark eyes roam over his face, and that's yet another thing that Izuku hates. It's hard to pretend around the man with how familiar they are to each other, so it would be easier all around if his teacher would just stop *looking*. "Do you know who sent them?"

Izuku pauses. Twenty-four, huh? Izuku remembers feeling around that many at the time, but he had at least thought there were a bit more. It sure felt like it then. "I didn't get a chance to see them, actually, so it's hard to tell. They, uh, they didn't enter the building. That's good, I guess, but that will just make it harder to track them later. I've gotta stop them from trying to hurt anyone else."

I have an idea who sent them, but it'll just make things worse if I say it.

"Track them?" Aizawa says with a start, something weird crossing over his expression.

Izuku's heart drops. "Yeah? I mean, not now. When I go back out as Rabbit." He stops suddenly, feeling very stupid. "Will I—will I be *allowed* to go back to that?"

At first, Aizawa doesn't respond. He's not looking at Izuku now, he's staring at the work in front of him with a frown. He opens his mouth,

only to close it right after. And that's new. Aizawa is *rarely* at a loss for words. He usually answers someone immediately, or he'll just straight up ignore them. He never struggles to say something.

The boy feels that panic coming back to him full force, warring with the defiance that's threatening to take over his thoughts. Aizawa wouldn't stop him from doing that, would he? He has every *legal* right to, but that's not the point. He knows how much being Rabbit means to Izuku. He doesn't actually think that just because Izuku's life has been flipped upside-down that he'll stop being a vigilante, right?

But the more he's looking at the man, the more he's starting to think that that's not even what he's thinking about. Aizawa looks too *perturbed* for a question with such a black and white answer.

Are we even worrying over the same thing?

Aizawa looks back up at him and shakes his head. "We can discuss that later when you're feeling better. Here's my second question." The man sniffs, running a finger briefly under his nose. "That manila envelope Mic found at your place. What's in it?"

Oh, so Yamada *did* tell him about the things he found at the building. At least he knows the hero didn't go through anything. Or maybe he *did* and he just wants to keep what he found quiet for now.

"Nothing special."

Aizawa snorts at the innocent tone. "Sure."

The boy can't help but glare at him, ears burning. "It's nothing, really! It's just some stupid files and pictures! It's nothing *bad!"* Izuku breaks off and looks away again, his voice a whisper as he adds, "It's just incriminating stuff."

"Incriminating for yourself or for others?" Aizawa asks, raising both eyebrows.

Izuku thinks about the multitude of files in that envelope, ones that he's been collecting over a long period of time. He thinks about the photos he'd swiped from Endeavor's safe, and he thinks back to the testing documents on *himself*.

He would very rarely go into that envelope, which is why he put it in the crack in the wall in the first place. He's confident enough to say that Yamada wouldn't have even found it there if the explosions

hadn't crumbled away part of the concrete wall and exposed it.

The information in there is important. So important that most of it is in near illegible code.

"Uh, both?"

"Christ, kid." Aizawa pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fine. I don't suppose you'll let me look at the contents in there, so here's the last question." He levels Izuku with an even stare. "It's about your father. You haven't said much about him at all. We just need to know if—"

"No."

"—he was involved in any of this." Aizawa finishes with a sigh, looking as if he expected that very reaction. "Midoriya, you're gonna have to give me something eventually. You can't keep everything a secret."

Well, he can certainly try. It's much better that way.

"I *know,* and I'm—I'm sorry." Izuku lifts a shoulder quickly in a half-hearted shrug. "I just can't right now. It's not a big deal."

He can't *ever.*

The sudden silence stretches on, and Izuku stares down at his socked feet. He hates doing this more than anything. Lying by omission is still lying, after all.

Aizawa's typing starts back up again, and Izuku shifts nervously in the chair. He glances at the clock on the wall and takes in a shaky breath. *Cue the subject change.* "You know, if I leave now, I'll be able to make it to the vet right around the same time Yamada will. Why can't I just —?"

"I already said no, Midoriya."

No, you didn't. You just avoided the question yesterday. You didn't tell me shit. Izuku forces himself to swallow those words and grips the sides of the wood chair, quietly seething. "But why?"

Aizawa clicks onto another tab. "Because you're not fully healed yet. You'll just hurt yourself by straining so much."

"That's *bullshit."*

The boy winces immediately after he says it, and Aizawa pauses in his work to peer at him, eyes narrowed. “Watch your mouth. The cats are around.”

It takes all of Izuku’s strength to stop himself from snapping back that his nose is too big for him to be able to do that, and the boy instead has to start counting off on his fingers to distract himself. “You gave Tsukauchi my phone without me even knowing, you won’t let me leave this apartment for anything, not even school, and *you’re* here watching me instead of being at work, which *never* happens.” Izuku grits his teeth and glowers at him, feeling a sudden burst of courage stem from his restlessness. “That has nothing to do with me not being healed. You just don’t trust me.”

Aizawa doesn’t hesitate for a second. “I don’t trust your ability to know what’s best for yourself,” he corrects, and Izuku bristles.

He’s not a *baby,* so Aizawa needs to stop acting like he is. He can take care of himself. He *has* been taking care of himself. For years, in fact.

Izuku turns away, not wanting to continue the conversation lest he ends up losing that last bit of self-control. Now is not the time to get pissed.

And so Izuku takes to ignoring Aizawa completely for the rest of the day. He stays in the guest room, scheming, until Yamada finally arrives back with Missy in his arms.

The feline goes ballistic when she sees Izuku, and for a good half an hour she doesn’t let him leave her side. She claims back her perch on his shoulder, hissing triumphantly at the other three cats below, and for a few short minutes there, everything is okay.

Izuku is so preoccupied with playing with Missy and ensuring that she’s unharmed that he almost forgets about his previous irritation.

Almost.

Yamada decides to order in dinner tonight, and Izuku only manages to get a few bites down of the food before asking to be excused. Confused and more than a little concerned, Yamada assures him that he never has to ask that here, and before Izuku leaves he adds that he’ll put the leftovers in the microwave again just in case.

Izuku has never left a table quicker.

He sits on the marshmallow bed, staring up the ceiling with Missy curled up on his chest. This isn't a sleeping kind of night either, it seems. He'll just have to bear it.

Good thing he has experience in that.

The next day passes by in similar fashion. Izuku makes sure to give Yamada a note for Kacchan before he leaves, asking him to please pass it on to him before the explosive teen blows up the school in his worry. Hopefully things will go well, and hopefully Kacchan won't be even *more* pissed once he receives the short note.

Izuku was very vague about what happened. He only explained that he's going to be staying with the hobo man for a little while and will have to tell him the details of it later. Izuku isn't expecting a nice note back, but who knows.

When the boy finishes a quick shower, using some of the extra products under the sink, he comes back out to find Aizawa sitting at the dining table with his work spread out in front of him, hands flying over his keyboard.

And this is great—no, *fantastic* for Izuku. This is the perfect set-up for his plans.

Remember when Izuku said he shouldn't take his frustrations out on his teacher? Yeah, fuck that. Now it's quickly going to become his *favorite* thing to do.

Izuku knows just what to do that'll annoy Aizawa the most. If there's one thing he knows, it's that his teacher doesn't like disturbances. Not while he sleeps, and most certainly not while he works. So the fact that he looks to be making lesson plans right now is just an added bonus, one that has Izuku's desire for chaos increasing tenfold.

The boy is sitting on the couch now, arms crossed with Missy and Meatball on his lap, currently working up his courage. After a few seconds he quietly puts the bottom of his foot on the edge of the coffee table, eyebrows furrowing. The table isn't over carpet or anything, just hardwood floor. So if he starts to push it away from him little by little with his foot, he *knows* the sound of it scraping against the ground will be like nails on a chalkboard to Aizawa.

He prepares his foot, scooting as close to the edge of the couch as possible so he can have the maximum pushing distance.

The first one is quick. Just a quick nudge with his foot that has the table groaning loudly and sliding across the floor.

He glances up, but Aizawa's back is still turned. He either didn't notice or just doesn't care.

Oh. He'll care soon enough.

The second one is longer, with the table legs scraping against the tile in a very uncomfortable manner. *Skrrrrt.*

Izuku pauses. The tapping on the keyboard had stopped briefly, but now it's back to writing. *Hm. Not enough.*

He does it again. *Skrrrrrrt.*

Aizawa looks back this time, eyebrows furrowed, and Izuku immediately averts his gaze, staring out the window innocently and biting on his inner cheek to quell his own anxieties.

He chances a glance at his teacher when the feeling of being watched fades, and he sees Aizawa taking a sip of his coffee.

Izuku hopes it's cold.

The boy waits a good minute before doing it again, just to make Aizawa think it's over. This one is by far the longest and most annoying push yet, with Izuku having to stretch his leg even further to get the desired effect.

Skrrrrrrrrt—

"I'm not letting you go out when you're still healing, so quit it."

Izuku scoffs quietly, cheeks burning at being found out so quickly. *This is a test of wills, is it not? We shall see if your ability to put up with my incessant screeching outlasts my eternal desire for freedom. Years of conditioning have hardened me for this purpose.*

The boy sets his jaw and waits. For this to work out in his favor, he has to be persistent. He has to space it out, as that'll annoy Aizawa much more.

Skrrt.

In the reflection on the laptop's screen, Izuku can just see Aizawa's face. He's definitely getting irritated now.

Skrrrrt.

There's an eye twitch. He's getting closer.

Skrrrrrrrt.

Izuku sees a vein pop out and counts it as a mini victory.

The next one is more sudden since Izuku had to practically kick the edge of the table to get it to go anywhere.

SKRRCH—

Aizawa huffs and turns around completely, arms folding over his chest. *"Midoriya."*

The disapproving eyes and stern tone finally gets to him, and Izuku starts to instinctively pet Missy and Meatball just to have something to do. "What? I was just testing out the table's durability."

His teacher just shakes his head, not deigning that with a response, and goes back to his work.

Izuku crosses off the table-screeching method in his head, deciding that it ultimately wasn't annoying enough.

On the third day, something changes.

Aizawa has to go on patrol that night, as his agency doesn't have anyone to cover his routes this time around, and Izuku *hates* how he starts to feel worry creep up in his throat immediately after Aizawa tells him this.

He's supposed to be angry at the man right now. Not worried. The boy had spent the entire day doing everything he could think of to piss him off, from *accidentally* running into him hard enough to make him spill his morning coffee to continuously turning the TV on and off with the volume as high as it could go—to everything in between.

He just wants to make Aizawa snap. Because if he does, maybe he'll just give in and let him go outside. Or, better yet, maybe he'll realize that Izuku isn't worth his time and just kick him out. Both are good choices.

It doesn't help that Izuku should also be out there, too, fighting alongside Aizawa. That's what they've been doing for a while now, so it's only fair. Well, that's what they've been doing up until the most recent incident. Now things have changed, but arguably not for the better. Izuku has no costume, no contacts or voice changer, and no weapons. Rabbit is, at least for the moment, dead to the world.

But he should still be out there. It doesn't matter about anything else. It's Izuku's job to protect the people. The public is going to realize soon enough that he's not doing that, and then things will go downhill *very* quickly.

He doesn't even want to think about what will happen at that point.

Aizawa leaves just after dinner, promising to be back around three, and Izuku retreats to the guest room soon after that. He feels only slightly guilty at turning down Yamada's offer to watch a few movies in the living room, simply telling the man that he was too tired. And it isn't a lie, really. Not this time.

He almost wants to sob in relief when he feels himself start to finally succumb to sleep after flopping down onto the too-soft marshmallow bed. It seems his mind has decided to take the hint and start cooperating with his body, as he's been begging his brain to let himself sleep for days now. He hasn't rested since those drugs knocked him out at the hospital, and even then that doesn't really count.

But Izuku finds himself wishing, just a few hours later, that tonight could've been another one of those sleepless nights. The moment he surrenders to the darkness and allows himself to fall asleep, the earth is ripped out from under him like a rug, and those dark thoughts come back to him in the form of a nightmare.

To Izuku, it feels like the dream goes on forever, though it couldn't have been more than an hour at most after falling asleep that he wakes back up abruptly.

He startles into consciousness, stiff and trembling, his breath frozen in his chest.

As his mind shapes his awareness, he forgets most of the details. All

for One's voice, for one thing, was in the dream, and Izuku can still feel the hands on him, grabbing his arm, digging into his flesh, and the *screams.*

No, no, wait—I'm sorry—

Izuku's heart beats fast, too fast, and he can't make himself move. He's not breathing, he *can't* breathe, he can't. It's dark and his father is out there, All for One's *out there,* just like he always is. Always waiting beyond every corner, always hiding within every shadow.

No, I didn't mean to—please, I can't—I'll be good, I swear—

When Izuku finally moves, it's oh so slowly, with terror clawing into his heart. He pulls the covers tighter around his body and curls up into the smallest ball he can, ears ringing and body trembling. He doesn't know this room. This bed doesn't feel like his.

His eyes squeeze shut.

Fall asleep, fall asleep, fall asleep, he wills himself. *C'mon, please!*

It's not real, some faraway part of him cries, but Izuku doesn't know what to believe anymore.

He can't slip back into sleep, so eventually Izuku forces his limbs to move and stumbles out of the room, trying not to make too much noise as he heads for the living room. He flicks on the TV and immediately mutes it, just standing there in front of the screen. He stays like that for who knows how long, shaking and sucking in breaths as he watches the pictures flash by and voiceless people move their mouths.

The nightmare tugs at his thoughts. He doesn't even remember it fully, but it sits under his skin.

It's a bitter, bitter reminder that Izuku will never be free. He'll never be truly happy. Not with who he is. It's hard to be happy when you've got a catalogue of sins and a host of terrors *eating* at your soul, preventing you from enjoying even the smallest amount of sleep.

Missy and Sushi join him in the living room, their intelligent eyes just watching as Izuku paces the floor. The television was supposed to distract him, but that doesn't seem to be working. His thoughts are still going a hundred miles per hour, each one darker than the last.

All for One is out there. Just waiting. And with every second that passes by with Izuku here, at this house, the more Yamada and Aizawa are being put in danger. Yamada, who is always nice to him even though he doesn't deserve it, and Aizawa, who is on patrol right now and *incredibly* vulnerable.

Fuck. Why did Izuku even bother trying to sleep? Aizawa could get hurt, or they could get attacked here, or this very apartment could *explode* suddenly. Izuku can't—he can't afford to sleep. He has to be ready.

His eyes land on the door, and he grits his teeth.

He could run. He might not get very far with how shaken up he is right now, especially since Aizawa is already on patrol and consequently has a higher chance of finding him, but he could do it.

Izuku could *run.* And oh, how tempting that is. His disappearance would save Yamada and Aizawa a lot of trouble.

And yet, he hesitates. He doesn't know what the best course of action is at the moment. What would he accomplish by running now? He just panicked over a fucking *nightmare,* which is about as childish as it gets. He's definitely not stable enough to go out tonight.

So maybe just not yet? Eventually he'll have to run, just not yet. Is that okay? Is this where he belongs *right now?*

Can he allow himself this?

He's been searching for a place to truly belong all his life, it seems. His cold, abandoned building was the closest thing he had to that, but now he's lost. He doesn't know where he belongs.

Izuku sits on the couch, head in his hands, and Missy leaps up after him with Sushi following close behind.

The television is still on, and it looks like it's playing some stupid old reality show now, but the boy doesn't pay any attention to it. He wouldn't be able to focus on it anyway with how muddled his brain is.

"I didn't take you for a fan of *Keeping Up With The Kardashians,* listener."

Izuku jumps, his eyes wide as he whips around to stare at Yamada's

form hanging by the mouth of the hallway. How long has he been standing there? Long enough to see him contemplating going out the door? Izuku was so distracted that he didn't even sense him coming, much less sense standing there. Izuku tries to calm the rapid pounding of his heart and tries to search for an excuse, but all that comes out is: "Shouldn't you be asleep?"

He snaps his mouth shut immediately after the words leave his lips, wincing at his own bluntness, but Yamada fortunately doesn't look upset. The blond is in sleep clothes, sporting a black long-sleeved shirt and a pair of Midnight-themed sweatpants, looking almost as exhausted as Izuku is. He gives the boy a soft, knowing smile. "I could say the same to you," he teases, heading for the couch with a yawn.

Izuku's eyes catch on the bright pink socks the voice hero has on, and he finds himself briefly wishing that he had a pair like that of his own. They look soft.

Yamada rounds the corner of the couch and reaches for the remote, making Izuku realize he's probably in the way now. Does the voice hero come out here often to be by himself?

"Sorry, I'm just gonna go back to the guest—"

"You're fine, kiddo," Yamada says, waving him off and gesturing for him to stay on the couch. He heads for the kitchen after unmuting the television, flicking on the lights. "Hot chocolate?"

For a good few seconds, Izuku is speechless. He doesn't quite comprehend what the man just said, so it takes a bit to actually formulate a response. But Yamada doesn't rush him. He's patient, just humming a quiet tune under his breath as he gets the packets out and waits for Izuku's response.

And it's… comforting, knowing that he doesn't have to rush to collect his thoughts. That he doesn't have to pretend to be someone he's not right now. Izuku can just be himself, as flawed as that is, and he doesn't think Yamada will judge him for it.

It's too nice, which is why Izuku doesn't move from the couch even after his own mug of delicious hot chocolate with mini bunny marshmallows in it has been finished off.

Izuku doesn't move when they finish the first episode of that dumb reality show on TV, and he also doesn't move after the second and the third. By the fourth episode, Izuku and Yamada are covered in

blankets and cats, giggling and cracking jokes with each other about the meme-worthy content being shown.

It takes a while, and Izuku doesn't even know exactly how it happens, but he calms down. His breathing evens out, his mind clears of all his previous thoughts, and he relaxes.

This isn't so bad, he thinks. This is okay. And besides, Yamada got his Movie Night after all, so it's a win-win for both sides.

It's only after another episode that Izuku manages to build up some courage. "Um, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to, but I just had a question?" He looks down at the cat in his lap as an excuse to not have to face the man. "Why are you still up?"

Do you have trouble sleeping, too? Did you also wake up from a nightmare?

"Sometimes it's hard to sleep when he's on patrol," Yamada says with a sad smile, not hesitating to answer even a little bit. "He's very capable, but that doesn't mean I won't worry. There are some terrible people out there. I'm sure you know that."

Izuku does know that. Very well, in fact.

And Yamada's response? It's not quite the same reason Izuku has, but it's close. The voice hero is a protector, too. He has to always be ready, always be the first to react and observe. So does this mean that Izuku's worrying is natural? That he's not as pathetic as he thinks he is? If Present Mic is having such similar thoughts all the time, then maybe Izuku isn't so weak after all. Maybe he's not as dumb and weird as he thought himself to be.

Though he doubts that. There must be some variable he's missing here. Yamada also wouldn't get upset about a stupid nightmare, either. Izuku is not even close to the same level as his teacher is.

"And what about you, kiddo? Do you want to share?"

Izuku stiffens, his first instinct telling him to say *fuck no!* But it would only be fair, right? Yamada opened up to him, so now he has to return the favor. Is that how things like this go? Izuku wouldn't know. "I, uh, I just can't sleep. It's the bed. It's too, it's too soft, I think?" He laughs nervously, realizing how dumb he sounds. "I don't know. It just feels like a—"

“A marshmallow?”

The boy blinks in mild surprise at the guess. At the accuracy of it. Yamada sounds like he’s speaking from experience. “Yeah,” Izuku whispers. “A marshmallow.”

And now that Yamada has said it, everything makes so much more sense. He sees it now and briefly wonders how he never put it together before. They're both similar, in a way. Always acting, always putting on a different face for different crowds—it’s altogether too obvious.

Yamada is exhausted by it all, and so is Izuku. Perhaps this is why Yamada is more of an introvert behind closed doors, where no one else can see him or recognize him. This is closer to who he really is—Yamada Hizashi: a fun and loving man with a too-fast brain, a caring personality, and a fierce passion for doing good. He’s still loud and carefree, just not as exaggerated as his TV figure portrays him to be.

This realization, this *knowledge* that Izuku isn’t alone in that necessity of his to *act,* is like a slap to the face. A *comforting* slap to the face. Izuku hangs onto every word the voice hero says when he starts talking about his favorite old American movies and baking shows, and the boy doesn’t even protest when Yamada jokingly starts to shift the conversation into cutting Izuku’s hair, because apparently it looks like a *real* bush now with how many chunks are burnt off. Izuku doesn’t mind getting a haircut. He needed one a long, long time ago.

Yamada goes on to talk about how Izuku’s classmates are trying to get him to slip up about his and Aizawa’s absence. They’re apparently scary and persistent when they want to be, and none of them have accepted his shitty excuses so far—especially Kacchan, which makes Izuku feel warm for a different reason. His best friend may have a little backstory to what’s happening now, but of course he’s still searching. Izuku never realized just how far his friends would go for him until now.

He really doesn’t deserve them.

And so they talk well into the night about dumb things that probably don’t mean anything to the random civilian but mean the *world* to Izuku. The fact that Yamada is here and listening to him is more than he ever would’ve expected or hoped for, so that might be why. The voice hero could talk about fucking *quantum physics* and Izuku would still listen to him for hours.

It's just easy to talk with him. His quirk has always felt so bubbly and welcoming. It makes him feel *safe.*

But Izuku's lack of sleep is starting to take a toll on him, and by the time the clock reads 1:30, the boy can barely keep his eyes open for longer than a few seconds.

An old Disney movie is playing now, the sounds of it a simple background noise to Izuku. The rest of the cats have emerged from their various hiding places in the house and joined together with them on the couch, their warmth making him feel even more comfortable.

If the hero beside him is a protector at heart, too, does that mean Izuku can let himself go? If only for a moment? Can he let his teacher do the worrying for him? It sounds selfish, but Izuku is just so *exhausted.* If he can just fall asleep and stay that way this time, maybe he won't need to be selfish again. It'll be a simple recharge. A quiet reprieve.

Can he have that?

"Yamada," he starts quietly, the traitorous words slipping between his lips before he can stop them. "I'm tired."

The hero doesn't tease or poke fun at him for the admission. Instead, he just gives another small smile, eyes crinkling near the edges as he looks down at him. Huh. Izuku doesn't remember moving so close to him. "You can let yourself sleep, kiddo. No one's going to hurt you here."

And is that true? Izuku feels like it is. He wants it to be. *God,* does he want it to be. But even with that thought at the forefront of his mind, he still can't help but hesitate, because *what if?* What if he's not safe here? He wasn't even safe in the comfort of his own home, so how can he be safe *here*—in an apartment that's not his? In a place where the clothes on his back don't belong to him?

The harsh reality of it all is that he doesn't deserve to be safe. What has Izuku done to grant himself that privilege? Nothing. He's just going to be condemned to fighting and running his entire life, and he can't even bring himself to be angry about it anymore.

Really, he shouldn't have been surprised when the bombs went off that night. His father never would've let him leave the country on his own. It was such a dumb, childish plan on Izuku's part, and look where he's at now because of it. His sort of hopeful naivety has struck

back in the worst way.

But this can be different, though, can't it? This doesn't have to be like everything else. What would happen if he allows this moment of vulnerability now? What would happen if he admits to himself that maybe he *is* safe here, that maybe he *can* relax for just a moment or two and let an adult do the worrying for once?

Would allowing this lead to a bigger moment of vulnerability later on? Or will that happen anyway?

Izuku shivers despite the fluffy blankets and cats covering him. He doesn't like this uncertainty. He doesn't like not knowing. Everything has been too easy these past couple days, too *kind.* Nothing feels real anymore.

But Yamada has never hurt him before. He's always been this quiet, steady support for Izuku. With every laugh and shared cat picture and greasy Slim Jim at the laundromat, Izuku would feel himself get *lighter.*

Truly happier.

And right now that same feeling is settling over his skin; warm and sweet and comforting. Like hot chocolate in the snow.

This is okay, he decides. He can—he can allow this just once.

Besides, what's the worst that could truly happen? He's already lost so much. What more could he lose?

Izuku's head slowly drops onto the voice hero's shoulder, eyelids threatening to flutter shut, and Yamada doesn't hesitate in shifting a little to accommodate him. When he speaks, his voice is softer than Izuku's ever heard it before: "I'll be here when you wake up, listener. Get some rest, 'kay? You can rest now."

He won't leave? The thought is more comforting than it probably should be, and Izuku finds himself shuffling closer. This is okay. He won't leave. It's okay.

Yamada raises an arm, his hand coming down to rest lightly on Izuku's head as the boy shifts further into his side. The weight is a nice contrast to the floating feeling inside his chest.

Utterly spent, Izuku is too tired to even be embarrassed, but he feels

lighter and better than he has in days. He shuts his eyes and hesitantly reaches up to grab at the hero's sweater, holding onto him like a child once he sinks a little lower into the couch.

"Yamada?" He mumbles, drifting already.

The blond hums, starting to gently card his fingers through verdant curls.

"About you and Aizawa. I actually figured it out another way."

"Oh, yeah?" Yamada muses. "How's that?"

"It's the way you talk to each other when you think no one is listening."

The hand pauses briefly. "And which way is that?"

Izuku tucks his face into his side and yawns against him, an overwhelming sense of warmth and safety tugging him into sleep.

"Like you've loved each other for a long time."

The void welcomes him in, and for the first time in a long, long while, Izuku falls asleep and doesn't wake up trembling.

Chapter End Notes

> you'll find that pretty rose vines are just as lovely when they wrap tight over your limbs and shatter your bones.
>
> (just a little fluff. as a treat)
>
> this chapter inspired by this emotional song on youtube!!
> l

breaking point

Chapter Notes

warnings: slight gore; emotional breakdown

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hizashi wakes to the sound of keys turning in the door lock.

His eyes snap open, muscles tensing and arm instinctively curling tighter around the boy in his side—but then his husband steps through the doorway a moment later and he relaxes.

It must still be late if Shouta's just now getting home. Well, *early* would be a more appropriate term depending on what kind of person you are.

The television is still on and, by the looks of it, playing another Disney classic. If Hizashi's memory serves him correctly, this one is Mulan. He must have turned the volume down sometime before falling asleep, though, as he can barely hear it now. The sound is a mere white noise in the background, and the light from the screen casts a faint glow in the otherwise pitch-black room.

"You're still up?" Shouta asks quietly, shutting the door gently behind him. He looks surprised that Hizashi still has his hearing aids in—the voice hero forgot to take them out before going to sleep. Midoriya's presence pushed him out of his normal routine, it seems. Though that's not a bad thing.

Not a bad thing at all.

Shouta takes off his capture weapon and hangs it up on the wall, his mouth making a little *o*-shape once he sees the second, much smaller figure curled up next to his husband. He frowns and pads closer after slipping out of his boots, neon cat socks sliding over the hardwood floor. "Is he alright?"

Hizashi hums something in affirmation, making sure to keep his voice quiet so as not to wake him. "He was sitting out here a few hours after you left." He tilts his head and resumes carding his fingers through Midoriya's hair. "Turns out that watching the Kardashians yell at each other over family drama is a good way to get him to sleep."

The black-haired man lets out a fond huff and moves closer, peering down at the pair from behind the couch. He doesn't look to have any cuts or bruises on him from patrol, Hizashi notes, so he leaves it be for now. "Want me to carry him to his room? Sleeping on the couch is going to kill your back, you know."

Well, according to Hizashi's phone it's only been a couple of hours since they both fell asleep. There's not much time left before the sun comes up, so why bother going through all that?

Hizashi shakes his head. "You might wake him up, and just look at him. He looks like he needs all the sleep he can get, Sho."

Shouta does look, dark eyes settling on the face half-hidden in Hizashi's side, a few freckles just visible for them to see. He looks smaller, Hizashi decides when he looks at Midoriya as well. More peaceful.

He hasn't seen the kid look this carefree since, well, *ever.* Not even at school, where he's supposed to be safe and surrounded by pro-heroes. He always looks apprehensive and on edge, as if waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting for the blow to land. And who's dealing the blow, Hizashi isn't sure. Maybe to Midoriya, it's everyone.

No. He's not gonna move him or leave him here. He told the kid he'd stay with him, so he's going to do just that.

"I'll stay out here tonight," he whispers, readjusting the blanket so it goes back up over the listener's shoulders. "You can go to bed without me. Did you eat?"

Shouta nods and mutters something about getting a burger along the way, which isn't a surprise. He normally does that on nights where his patrol goes on a bit later than usual.

"And fine," Shouta adds, "stay out here if you want. But you better not complain about your back hurting in the morning."

He's obviously joking, but Hizashi teases him anyway. "I'd *never.*"

Shouta leans over the back of the couch to press a quick kiss to his cheek in retaliation. "You're a softie," he grumbles, but Hizashi can hear the warmth in his voice clear as day when he pulls away.

"And you're not?" He shoots back.

Shouta grins with all his teeth, eyebrows raised. *“Never.”*

Hizashi has to stifle his laugh so he doesn’t accidentally wake the kid next to him, and he smiles smugly to himself when Shouta reaches down to pat Midoriya’s head once before making for the hallway.

Uh-huh. Definitely not a softie, hm?

Whatever. He can deny it all he wants. If his husband didn’t want the kid to be here, he wouldn't be. It sounds harsh, but that’s the reality of it.

Hizashi props his legs up on the coffee table, getting more comfortable. Midoriya shifts a little, pressing further into his side, and the voice hero inwardly coos. There are only a few hours left till he has to get up for work, and his back *is* going to hate him in the morning, but honestly it’s whatever.

He’ll bear it for the kiddo. He knows Midoriya definitely needs the rest.

When Izuku wakes up, he’s curled up on the couch, a thick blanket thrown over him and protecting him from the chill hanging in the apartment.

The first thing he hears is something sizzling in the kitchen, and his stomach gives a lurch when he smells bacon.

Is he… in the living room? How did he get here? Why isn’t he in the guest room like he’d usually be? Izuku doesn’t know off the top of his head. He just remembers not being able to go back to sleep last night after that nightmare, and having to come out here afterwards for a few minutes to clear his head. He remembers looking at the door and contemplating, and then he remembers seeing Yamada—

Oh. *Oh.*

He jolts up, the blanket flying off his shoulders, and it’s almost

comical how fast his cheeks turn red. Did he—did he sleep on Yamada? *Again?*

Izuku is going to die. Maybe not right now, but later he's just going to curl up and die from embarrassment. He's so stupid. How did it even *get* to that? Izuku has always tried to distance himself from dumb emotions. And leaning on Yamada for the *second* time while he finally gets some sleep? It's pathetic!

"Mornin', kiddo!"

He does *not* nearly fall off the couch in his panic, thank you very much. Izuku has much more grace than that.

His head snaps up, eyes widening upon seeing Yamada sitting on the loveseat diagonal to the couch. He looks to be putting on his shoes for work, as he's already got his hero costume on and his hair gelled up. Just how long has he been sitting there? Izuku hadn't even thought to check his senses before now.

He didn't feel the need to, in all honestly. He felt safe. He still does, in fact.

"Sho's making breakfast today since I gotta go in early for a meeting," Yamada tells him. "You gonna be okay?"

Izuku would probably question what he meant by that last part if he wasn't still frozen in place. He's still staring at him as if he's seen a ghost, because does Yamada not—does he just not *care?* That Izuku literally slept on his arm again and probably stopped him from going to sleep himself? Fuck. Izuku is, for the fiftieth time, a damn *fool.*

Yamada frowns. "Is there something on my face?"

The green-haired boy opens his mouth but nothing comes out, and he only looks away when he suddenly remembers that staring is rude. He brings his knees up to his chest and shakes his head, eyes trained on the two cats curled up on the other end of the couch.

Is he not upset? He didn't seem upset that night at the laundromat, either, and that time was arguably worse since Izuku wasn't as close to Yamada then as he is now.

But that doesn't make this time right. So why is Yamada acting like it doesn't matter?

The voice hero leaves within the next fifteen minutes, promising to bring Izuku back an English book that he's assigning the class to read, and the entire time he doesn't say a word about what happened.

So does that mean it's really not a big deal?

Izuku starts to pace the house after eating some of the breakfast Aizawa made. It turns out that the man actually does know how to cook almost everything, he just chooses not to. And honestly? That's a mood.

Maybe he's overthinking things. Maybe he's making a big deal out of nothing. If Yamada truly had a problem with it he would've said something, or better yet stopped it from happening entirely. He didn't seem upset about it when Izuku woke up, but at the same time he could just be avoiding it to be polite.

Christ. Izuku hates this. He hates this uncertainty. Everything was going okay, but then Izuku just *had* to fuck it all up.

He has to distract himself. He has to *do* something, even if that something is thinking of random stuff that will make him fall further into his abyss of a mind.

Izuku huffs in frustration and scratches at the small scar on his jaw, muttering odd facts he's learned from Tsukauchi to himself. "Dumplings imply the existence of one large dumple."

Aizawa snorts from his place at the table, making Izuku blink in surprise. "That's nice, kid."

Dammit. Now he looks weird. That's not necessarily a bad thing, though, as this is just Aizawa. That man knows a lot about him, probably even more so than he even lets on, so Izuku isn't worried about acting like a fool in front of him. If it were Yamada, on the other hand, Izuku might be a little more worried and try to curb his unusualness.

But still. He's going to go insane if he just stands around for the fourth day in the row. This has to be bad for his health, he thinks, as he's a growing teenager. Shouldn't he be out robbing rich people and acting suspicious? Or maybe that's just Izuku in general, not so much other kids his age.

Maybe he should ask Aizawa again if he can go out. His question might not be well-received, but he should still *try*.

He stops his pacing and glances at the dining table. Sure enough, the underground hero is still sitting there, as he has been for the majority of the week. It's almost annoying how much he's there, even though it's not really his fault. He's always working, and Izuku understands that.

He slides into the opposite chair, ignoring Aizawa's suspicious glance as he picks up the textbook on the table and starts fiddling with it. Perhaps he should've figured out how to sweet-talk him before coming over here. Would Aizawa even believe him if Izuku started complimenting his hero work? Probably not.

Izuku clears his throat after a few minutes, voice coming out dry. "Aizawa, can I—?"

"No."

"What?" Izuku starts, dropping the textbook. It hits the table with a loud *thump,* but Izuku doesn't pay it any mind. He glares at Aizawa, who's currently staring into his laptop, typing away on the keyboard. "You don't even know what I was about to say!"

"I do know," he says. He doesn't bother looking at Izuku, not even as he speaks to him. "You were going to ask the same thing you've been asking this whole week, and the answer is still no."

Izuku creases his face, slamming his back against the dining room chair and digging his toes into the ground beneath him. Having spent the past few years living on his own, he isn't familiar with hearing the word *no,* so he doesn't appreciate hearing it from Aizawa.

It's not like Izuku has had to fight similar battles with his own father his whole *childhood* or anything. No, not at all.

The way his teacher is talking to him is insulting. It makes Izuku want to hack his ears off with an axe. Makes him want to *throw* an axe at him.

Aizawa and his stupid rules and fake concern for his safety makes him want to leap out the window just to prove to Aizawa he can survive the fall. He's *healed,* dammit! He's fine. His building being burned down doesn't suddenly make him incapable of being able to walk around the streets for an hour or two.

The man is lucky Izuku hasn't just said *fuck it* and tried to walk straight out the door yet. That's getting all the more tempting with

each passing hour, actually. Would Aizawa fight him on it? Would he go so far as to try and physically stop him? Izuku doesn't know, which is why he kind of *needs* to find out.

But he hasn't found out yet. He hasn't tried to *really* run from the couple, and he also hasn't caused *too* much chaos during his stay here. No, he's done something worse: he's been *good.*

"That's a load of *shit!"* Izuku snaps, finally getting Aizawa's attention. The Erasure hero looks up from his laptop, but his expression remains dull, bored, and unimpressed.

"Watch it," he tells him flatly, pausing in his typing. "I told you not to cuss when the cats are around. They might get ideas."

Izuku crosses his arms and deepens his glare. Aizawa just stares back at him, blank-faced and calm, making Izuku slam his toes against the tile with even more resolve.

Jailor.

"Why can't I just go for a walk?" Izuku asks, cringing at his own voice, at the way it sounds like a whine.

That's part of the bullshit. That Aizawa makes him sound and feel like a child throwing a tantrum, when Izuku is actually fifteen—and an old fifteen at that. He's been taking care of himself before most kids knew how to pour milk into their cereal bowls.

He doesn't need Aizawa looking after him, which is exactly what he claims to be doing each time he tells him that dreaded word.

"Because you'll run the moment you step outside," his teacher says casually.

Well now that you said that I just fucking might.

"I *won't.* I just want to go out for a few minutes, I promise! I'm not gonna—"

"I said no, so drop it."

Izuku grits his teeth, stopping a few choice words from escaping his lips. Starting a fight won't get him any brownie points. "What if *you* go with me?"

Aizawa stares at him. Looks at him like he's stupid, and for a brief

couple of seconds, Izuku wonders if Aizawa is as frustrated as he is, until he shoves the thought away. Aizawa is the jailor here. He doesn't have a right to be frustrated.

"What if Yamada goes with me?"

That would be better than having to deal with your stupid face. Yamada doesn't treat me like a toddler at least.

Aizawa lets out a breath and runs a hand down his face. For a moment Izuku thinks he's going to snap at him, and his heart-rate skyrockets at the thought, palms becoming clammy. But then the man softens his expression, or at least tries to. Izuku gives him an F+ for effort.

"Listen," the hero starts, sounding entirely done with the conversation. "It's been a rough few days for you. I get it. You're unhappy. But you know why I'm not allowed to let you out in public right now, so deal with it until I figure out a way to fix this."

Fix this. As if there's anything to fix at all. Izuku isn't a vase that needs to be taped back together, thanks, and this situation may be trashy for both parties, but it's still *okay.* There's no reason for anything right now to change, except maybe Izuku's own lack of freedom. But once he's better he's going to leave for good. So why is Aizawa acting like this is supposed to be something more permanent?

"I can take care of myself," Izuku scoffs. He kicks at a table leg with a foot. "If someone decides to come after me again I'll be fine. I don't need a bodyguard."

Aizawa hums and goes back to his typing. "So nearly kicking the bucket the other day and getting a pipe stuck in your side is taking care of yourself?"

The silence that follows is heavy, and Izuku snaps his jaw shut. *Oh.*

One for All jolts under his skin, as if pissed on his behalf. The man is right, but perhaps it was just a little harsh. At the same time, though, Izuku has always appreciated that brutal honesty of his. This time is no different.

But still, now Izuku can *taste* the ash in his throat from that night, can *hear* the ringing in his ears from when he'd desperately tried to hang onto those last threads of consciousness. He remembers the scalding heat coming closer and closer and being unable to move away to save himself.

Of course Aizawa would use that against him. He's the one who found him, after all. He found him in more ways than one.

"That's unfair," Izuku says quietly, looking away.

He gets a sigh in response. "Life is unfair."

And it's such a *parent* thing to say that Izuku suddenly feels *that* much more tempted to throw the textbook at him. No, his laptop would be a better target. Damaging that thing, or at least aiming to do so, is a definite death-wish. But even being murdered by a pro hero is better than sitting around and being bored.

"Doesn't mean you have to be," Izuku mutters.

Aizawa just goes back to ignoring him in favor of whatever's so important on his laptop, and Izuku looks out the window, quietly seething. Freedom is so close, just separated by a thin sheet of glass and one Eraserhead, whom he's only been able to escape from a couple of times.

Maybe it isn't so close after all. Just looks that way, like some sort of cruel illusion.

He gets up and goes to the kitchen when the clacking of Aizawa's keyboard becomes too much for him. With nothing better to do, Izuku starts to mess with the microwave. He's taken apart one of these before just to see what the inside looked like, so he knows he could do it again now. It wouldn't be too difficult to put it back together.

And what if he could strengthen it somehow? That sounds like the most fun he could ever have at the moment.

The toaster seems like a better idea, though. Simple yet complex. Izuku could figure out how to install a screen into it if he had the right parts on hand.

Ooh! Maybe he could work on a new AI and base it off AINA—kind of like a rebirth.

He's in the middle of writing his ideas down in his notebook, the pencil that Yamada had given him scratching away against the paper, when he feels his throat itch. He coughs, and he's only a *little* surprised when he pulls back to see red dots splattered on his arm.

The meds from the hospital aren't helping him where he actually

needs the help. He's been getting used to them, so the symptoms of his sickness are coming back, and they're coming back *hard.* He needs his pills; the ones from his doctor at the Club. His remaining bottles became lost in the fire that night, so he doesn't have any left. The prescriptions from the hospital helps with his other issues, sure, but they're not doing much of anything about the hemoptysis.

And his ring isn't doing anything now either. It seems to only take the edge off since he's gotten used to it, which is exactly what All Might told him would happen, albeit for an entirely different circumstance.

Izuku feels queasy all of a sudden, a sharp wave of nausea overcoming him. If his ring is only helping to limit the power of his quirks now, what does he even need it for? He needs to practice with One for All if that's going to be the case from now on. He hasn't made any progress in trying to up the percentage he can use without the ring, which is frankly disappointing. He still doesn't have a good grip on One for All.

You're a cheater. Using a stupid suppressor to do all the work for you and mitigate all the damage. All Might didn't have to do that.

Izuku grinds his teeth, expression souring as he slides off his ring and swallows back the influx of copper at the back of his throat. He hasn't even called upon One for All lately, as he hasn't had much of a reason to, so that's the first step if he wants to improve it.

He powers up, and the red sparks that dance across his skin feel familiar and comforting. The slight heat the quirk gives off warms his body like a fluffy blanket, and he nearly sighs with relief.

If he can keep it going and just refrain from actually using it, perhaps that'll help in the long run. Lengthening his endurance is key, especially if he's going to try and focus his energy into one part of his body again. After he does that he can try messing with the percentage.

He honestly should've been doing this weeks ago, but the ring was just so *easy* to rely on. It was a simple and effective solution, and it seems now that the attack on him was the wake up call he needed.

"You've never told me the details of your quirk," Aizawa prompts, coming up behind him.

Izuku isn't surprised, as he'd heard his footsteps. His first thought is *shouldn't you be working,* but he bites his tongue. That would sound

childish, and Izuku is anything but.

“It’s just a strength enhancer,” he grumbles, turning away. He has to be careful about how he words this. Aizawa is something of a walking lie detector himself. “It takes a lot of energy, so sometimes it’s hard to control. Hence *this.”*

He gestures vaguely with his sparking arms, and Aizawa hums, dipping his head as he takes a sip of his coffee. “You know, Hizashi had the same problem with his quirk.”

That’s the first time he’s referred to Yamada by his first name around me. He usually uses Mic, like he does at school.

He frowns. “How? I know it was difficult to control it, but he never told me much else.”

Now, what does surprise Izuku is when Aizawa actually sets down his mug and starts to answer his question in-depth. Apparently Yamada couldn’t figure out how to control the volume of his quirk, even when just speaking normally, so there were many occasions of him accidentally screaming in a classmate’s ear and causing a public disturbance.

Like Aizawa said, it’s kind of similar to Izuku’s situation with how he can’t quite get a grip on the higher, more difficult percentages without losing control. But since Aizawa has known Yamada for a portion of his life and did end up graduating alongside him, perhaps he knows how the blond fixed that issue. Perhaps he could help Izuku with his own problem seeing as the situations are so similar.

And for the next half hour, Aizawa does just that.

He stands right beside him in the kitchen and works him through the steps and exercises that Yamada did to get used to his quirk’s energy and potential. He gives Izuku plenty of analogies and ideas on how to master his control, and the boy is satisfied when, by the end of it, he can successfully charge up a little over twenty percent in his arm without the help of his ring—and without breaking anything!

Izuku is so stoked and eager to learn that he forgets about how upset he was at the man just a little bit before now.

But he’s reminded of why he really *should* be just a few hours later, when he’s sitting on the couch and playing with the cats, minding his own business up until Aizawa comes back from his sudden departure

to his room with a tablet in hand.

He gives it to Izuku, who blinks at the words already on the screen. “Um, what is this?”

“It’s a test of measurement,” Aizawa deadpans, just reading the title off the tablet itself. “Principal Nezu wants you to take it.”

And that’s all he says before walking back to his seat at the dining table. He pulls out a few files from the stack in front of him and puts on his glasses once again, becoming oblivious to the world outside his work.

It’s an IQ test, Izuku figures. That much is obvious. The first question is a simple one that asks him to identify the patterns between the pictures, and it’s almost laughably easy.

But Izuku doesn’t answer it immediately. He doesn’t want to do this at all simply because it’s Nezu who wants him to. The principal of UA is a rat, there’s no doubt about it, and Izuku will be damned if he’ll let a damn bastard rat know his intelligence and capabilities—no matter how curious the boy is himself about what his score would be.

He’s never taken an IQ test before, but he certainly doesn’t want to do it on Nezu’s terms. He has no doubt that the rat is involved in this entire situation somehow.

But Izuku doesn’t complain or outright refuse to do the test yet. That would be a pointless argument with Aizawa at this very moment. He begins to do it with little defiance, a manic grin on his face now.

He knows just the thing that’ll piss the rat off the most.

The test itself is interesting, and honestly Izuku kind of enjoys completing it. After only an hour later Izuku is handing the tablet back over to Aizawa, shrugging at the raised brow he gets in response.

“That was fast,” he says gruffly, almost suspiciously, and Izuku just chuckles to himself as he walks back over to the couch to resume playing with the cats.

Sue him, this is the most fun he’s had in *weeks.*

Izuku tries very hard not to smile when Aizawa says his name in *that* specific tone of his just another hour later. Ah, Nezu must’ve already

gotten the results and forwarded them back to the underground hero, which is why Aizawa sounds incredibly irritated.

“Yes?” Izuku says sweetly, the epitome of innocence.

“*Why* did you do this?”

It’s pretty fucking obvious what he’s referring to, but Izuku feels like being a little shit all of a sudden, so he just frowns, tilting his head at him. “Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

“This.” He holds up the tablet in his hand and zooms in on the screen, showing a large table and graph that has a ton of different categories. When Izuku still doesn’t say anything, he huffs. “You failed the test, kid.”

Interesting, the boy thinks.

“I thought it was a test of measurement. You can’t fail something like that,” Izuku points out.

“You can fail it when you get *every single question wrong.* Even this one.” He swipes the screen a few times, coming back to the first one Izuku had answered. “This is elementary school level, Midoriya. A *five-year-old* could have gotten this one right.”

Izuku shakes his head in mock shame. “In my defense, I’m having an off day today. And besides, I think that was actually the hardest question out of the entire test, so it’s a little rude to imply that I’m stupid for not knowing it.”

“Oh, fucking hell,” Aizawa mutters to himself, obviously wishing he had gone to work today after all.

“Hey! That’s a bad word! The cats might get ideas.”

Aizawa folds his arms over his chest and stares down at him, lips pressed in a thin line. “Why, kid? Just why?”

Izuku flushes at the calculating look being leveled at him. Izuku’s reason is stupid but one hundred percent reasonable, so the hero has no right to be staring at him like this. “Intelligence can’t be accurately quantified. It would’ve been a waste of time.”

“Midoriya.”

“Okay!” Izuku says harshly, turning away with an annoyed expression.

“I just don’t want Principal Nezu to know what my scores are. He shouldn’t know them.”

There’s a beat of silence, and then Aizawa sighs, this time much softer. “Okay. Why don’t you want him to know?”

Is being a rat enough reason?

He doesn’t say this, though, as he doubts Aizawa would be very happy with that answer. “He already knows too much. He—he’s probably the reason I’m here right now anyway.”

Aizawa doesn’t answer right away, his thoughtful eyes still roaming over Izuku’s face, which tells the boy all he needs to know.

After a few moments, the man unfolds his arms and starts to tap away again on the tablet, handing it back to Izuku wordlessly. He must see the question on the tip of Izuku’s tongue, for he explains without being prompted. “It’s a fresh test, and before you complain, I have an offer.”

Offer? Izuku’s stomach gives a painful jolt. Offers made by adults usually give way to nothing good.

The hero waits until he has Izuku’s full attention before continuing. “If you do this test honestly this time, to the *best* of your ability, kid, I’ll take you out on patrol next Friday.”

Izuku blinks, the words not registering at first. He’ll take him out on patrol? As in, *Rabbit and Eraserhead?*

Aizawa nods sharply, as if knowing exactly what he’s thinking. “I promise. Do the test and I’ll find a way to convince Nezu to let you go out as Rabbit with me.”

Oh *yes.* It won’t be hard to convince the rat that, Izuku thinks. Perhaps the principal *wanted* this to happen. His past research on the mammal would support this claim.

“Yes!” Izuku says hurriedly, eyes wide and sparkling with a light that wasn’t there before. “I’ll do it!”

This seems to surprise Aizawa just a little bit, as the man just stands there for a few seconds before letting out a relieved breath, reaching forward to pat Izuku’s head twice before going back to his work.

Izuku is still reeling from the contact even when the hero sits back down.

Maybe a little test isn't so bad if it means he can go out as Rabbit. Next Friday is a little over a week away. It's a long wait, and Izuku honestly didn't think he would even be here for that long, but it's *something.*

As Izuku starts to work his way through the test yet again, this time a little slower so he can double and triple check his answers, Aizawa moves to the kitchen to get a snack. It's been hours since breakfast, and neither of them have had lunch yet.

"Hey, kid," Aizawa calls, "did you eat the last jelly pack?"

And Izuku doesn't know why exactly he does it, but he panics at the question. Both Yamada and Aizawa have stated multiple times that he can eat anything he wants here, that he doesn't have to ask permission. Izuku knows all this, so he'd eaten the last one in the box sometime just after breakfast.

He *knew* it was Aizawa's, but he just—he thought it would be okay. He thought they wouldn't even notice. Or at least wouldn't care that much.

Aizawa doesn't sound angry. He sounds more like he just wants an answer, but Izuku can't help it.

"No!" He blurts out, the tablet case cracking in his grip. He releases it immediately before he can accidentally break it.

His teacher gives him a blank look and slowly closes the fridge door. "Midoriya, I don't care if you did. It's not a big—"

"I didn't!" Izuku says, more defensive this time. "I swear I didn't!"

He winces even as he says it. He hates himself for lying, but what's the alternative? Telling the truth? Admitting that he did take it despite his gut having warned against doing so? Aizawa might be upset with him if he tells him that. But it doesn't look like that matters now, as Izuku can't seem to be able to fucking lie all of a sudden.

It's not like Aizawa can't see right through him.

So stupid. Why am I so pathetic? It's just—it's just a jelly pouch.

“Okay,” Aizawa says after a short pause, voice reassuring even though it’s obvious he doesn’t believe the lie. “I was just wondering.”

And Izuku understands why he asked the question, of course. The man needs to know when things run out so he knows when to go out and buy them again, but it’s just the *principle* of it.

But lying to Aizawa over a jelly pouch? Of all things? Great. That’s just *fantastic;* just another tally to add onto his long list of mistakes.

His ears burn, and he stares down hard at the tablet screen. He wants to apologize. He wants to take it back and say *I was just kidding, it actually was me, haha, that was so stupid,* but now it would just be awkward.

So he ignores the tense silence that he caused and goes back to working on the test, wondering how much he’d have to pay the devil to just drag him under the earth right then and make him disappear.

It’s annoying, Katsuki thinks, how people don’t like to tell him things. It’s annoying how they keep him in the dark, especially in those circumstances where he should be the *first* to know about said things.

But what’s even *more* annoying is when he’s only told the *bare minimum*—and not even to his damn face, either. Katsuki has been informed of plenty of important circumstances and events through text and voicemail, which is kind of sickening.

How much effort does it take to just suck it up and tell someone the truth in person? It’s not like Katsuki would kill someone for no reason.

Well. This time might be different, but still.

He has to admit that he’s never had to deal with someone writing him an update on their health in the form of a crumpled up, obviously half-assed note.

Yeah, that's right. A fucking *note.*

When Katsuki was given the small slip from his dumb cockatoo of a teacher on the second day back, he had a hard time restraining himself from setting it on fire immediately after reading it. He's still very much tempted to blow it up, even after having a couple of days to cool down, but he manages to hold back. He knows it's important.

But that doesn't change what it is, and consequently what it represents. His not-friend can go fucking *fuck* himself. A damn *note,* really? It's better than nothing, sure, but still. Izuku didn't even explain anything in the message. It was more of a drunken ramble than anything.

The first line was literally: *to my dear Kacchan.*

And what the actual *hell?* Izuku missed a whole day of school without warning him beforehand, making Katsuki nearly have an inner meltdown during school on Monday, and then had the audacity to write him a fun little note? As if nothing was wrong?

He's gonna kill him. Katsuki is going to strangle him the next time he sees him, which will apparently be the start of next week. He's going to *destroy* him.

Izuku promised to explain exactly what happened to him soon, saying that he can't say anything too specific on the note because he's *not in the clear yet.* Whatever that means, it isn't good. Not with who might be monitoring him now, that is, and it's pretty obvious who that someone is.

He's waiting to talk with him face-to-face because it's safer that way, and also because he apparently doesn't have a phone anymore.

That's all Izuku had put in the note, and it left Katsuki seething. He can't write back, obviously, as that might jeopardize his friend's situation, so it's frustrating. It's also frustrating when the other idiots in class ask him if Izuku's alright, because apparently *everyone* knows that he's the closest to the missing boy.

Which just pisses him off even further, not only because Katsuki doesn't know, but also because they have no right to pry. Their questions usually lead to him yelling *I wouldn't tell you even if I did, so fuck off!* at them, which always earns himself a disappointed sigh from Present Mic for not at least saying it in English.

Katsuki is suddenly reminded of the Sports Festival and how he'd had his own quirk used against him. He remembers Izuku's palm on his skin, and then the feeling that he was dying. It only lasted a few seconds, but Katsuki knows exactly what happened during the last moments of their fight. It was that forced activation quirk, he's pretty sure. His control had been taken from him in that instant, and the resulting panic because of that made his subconscious ignite every part of his body by accident.

It's honestly a wonder he didn't die then.

He didn't want to accept first place. Izuku wasn't at his full potential even from the very start of the festival. He *never* is with how much he holds back. But Katsuki had taken it only because he knew Izuku would whine about it.

Katsuki remembers glancing at him when All Might was putting the medal over his head. He remembers seeing something in that sad expression of his. He looked at his friend and didn't see what he would normally see. The faint flicker that was always ever present in his eyes had disappeared. The kindness in them remained, but it was different somehow.

That look on Izuku's face was hauntingly familiar, and it sent shivers up Katsuki's spine. It was a look of guilt. A look of never-ending regret and apprehension.

He was going to leave then, wasn't he? That was the universal look of fight-or-flight, and Katsuki knows Izuku is more of a runner than a fighter when he isn't sure how things will work out.

And that's the thing. His friend is slipping away from him more and more with each passing day, and he doesn't understand why. He thought UA would make him happier. He thought things would be different, as naive as it sounds. Better.

But it seems that Izuku is just getting worse. He's going backwards. All of that progress Katsuki has tried to make with him, all of that steady build up—it's being torn down right now. He can feel it just by the tone of the note. The USJ attack must've been one of the blows to start this spiral.

He can still remember how it felt to carry his unconscious friend out of the shattered entrance of the training facility, black and red blood dripping onto his boots as he carried him to the medics. He can still remember how cold the raw panic coursing through him felt when he

saw Izuku's state.

And Katsuki hasn't been the world's greatest friend. He knows that; the *world* knows that. But wherever his friend is right now, he hopes it'll help him. He hopes it won't be the breaking point.

The note was written in a code that Katsuki had honestly forgotten about. That familiar rushed yet neat handwriting, that code that they had both used when they were little, back from *before*—it hurts. It's a painful reminder of how much Katsuki has failed.

The blond boy walks down the dark streets, the black clouds above promising rain and despair. School just got out, and he shouldn't be alone right now. Izuku should be right there with him, walking home with him just because he feels like it, but he's not.

This may not be the green-haired boy's fault, but the principle remains. Izuku has been keeping Katsuki from being close to him lately, even though the explosive teen just wants to make sure he's fine. It—it feels like they're nearing the end of it.

God, Katsuki doesn't want that to be true. He doesn't want to lose his best friend. He's been showing Izuku everything that's bright, and every time he would ask about his health the boy would respond with *I'm fine, Kacchan, really! You should worry about yourself first!*

And he is, really. Katsuki is being so *stupidly* selfish towards him, because he doesn't want Izuku to be okay just for the boy's well-being, he wants him to be okay for *himself*. Izuku has to be okay because Katsuki still *needs* him. He can't lose him. Not yet, and not ever.

Don't let me go. I can't handle losing you again.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, and his heart leaps in his throat. It turns out to just be a text from the hag, asking him what he wants for dinner. He stares at it for another few moments before leaving his mother on read.

It's Thursday, meaning Izuku will miss their regularly scheduled dinner completely instead of being fashionably late like all the other times. This fact is like a sledgehammer to the knees.

He gets another ping, this one being from the news outlet he follows. It's just another update on the attack the other day. The same keywords are there, and they make Katsuki scowl.

Stain. Ingenium. Paralyzed. Near-death.

Hero killer.

Katsuki looks up at the sky before arriving at his house, knowing that somewhere, wherever the damn hobo ninja is keeping him, Izuku might be looking up at it as well.

He hopes his friend isn't as lonely as he surely feels.

The fifth day starts out as the best day yet.

Izuku sasses at Aizawa every second he can spare, and the man responds back in kind every time. The friendly banter is something simple and familiar that Izuku can focus on, because if Aizawa isn't actually getting upset that means that everything's *okay*. *They're* okay. He's not as pissed at the man as before, but he's still itching to leave.

It's okay, but only for a while. Honestly, he should've known something like this would happen.

Sometimes fate *does* swing in his favor, but he knows that this particular event will still bite him in the ass somehow, as nothing is ever solely good for him.

And it's an accident, the way it happens. Really, Izuku wasn't supposed to find out, but alas. Some things just happen for a reason.

Izuku is messing with the papers spread out on the dining room table just to annoy Aizawa a little bit and fulfill his daily quota, and he eventually makes the man give in and hand him the tablet from the day before, being told to shoo.

A fair trade, if Izuku says so himself. That's the most freedom he's been given so far, so that isn't the problem.

The problem is that Missy must've been watching him mess with the papers and be an overall pain in the ass, as it's when Izuku is about to

send an ominous message to Principal Nezu from Aizawa's email (just to see how he'll respond) that Missy starts messing with the folders on the table as well. Aizawa looks to have gone into the kitchen for something, so Izuku tuts at her—but only because she looks to be going for the laptop.

Yamada isn't here to help either, as he had to go in to work at the studio. He won't be back until late.

In a flurry of black and white, Missy swishes her tail and leaps back off the table, sending all the papers and folders fluttering to the floor.

Izuku immediately curses to himself and gets to his feet to pick it all up. Normally he wouldn't help with something like this, but Missy *is* his cat. She acts just like Izuku sometimes, so it's only fair he helps out. He knows people can barely handle one of him, so *another?*

Aizawa approaches quickly from the kitchen as Izuku crouches down and stacks the papers. "Hey, kid, don't—"

But his warning comes too late. Izuku picks up one of the documents and turns it over, only to find out that it's actually a picture—and a *gory* one at that. He freezes, blood turning to ice.

The photo shows a person dressed up in all gray, eyes wide and milky as they lay, without life, on the roof of a building somewhere. The camera angle clearly shows the huge slice across the figure's stomach and abdomen, and Izuku gets the sudden urge to throw up when he spots some organs and intestines halfway out of the body.

Holy… what the fuck *is* this?

He quickly picks up another one, heart pounding loudly in his ears. This photo shows something similar, but this time the slice goes diagonal across the chest and stops at the hip. There's another cut right around the throat, and that one looks a little deeper, which means—

This person must've drowned in their own blood.

Izuku's eyes travel lower, and he lets out a silent gasp. The paper has a caption that reads *Image: 13/24.*

This is only one of twenty-four? But that's how many were… that's how...

He sees Aizawa moving towards him at the last second, but he's still not fast enough to dodge the hands of the underground hero. The papers are snatched out of his grip, as if that could erase what Izuku's already seen.

No, the damage has already been done.

"What was that?" Izuku asks. He feels cold all of a sudden. Numb.

Aizawa sounds annoyed. Flustered, almost, which *never* happens. "That was confidential, Midoriya. You can't just touch—"

"Twenty-four," he repeats, his voice a shocked whisper when he cuts Aizawa off. "That paper said there's twenty-four of these in total. Twenty-four bodies. Are those… are those the people that attacked me?" Izuku gets more urgent at the lack of an immediate reply. He realizes that it's a far stretch, that the number 24 can mean anything, really, but he just can't see any other possible alternative. It would make sense. *Too* much sense. The pictures he saw showed the bodies on top of a roof—Izuku has been on enough to recognize the kind of gravel and concrete they were on.

So they were obviously on a building before they died. No, before they were…

"Were they *murdered?"*

Izuku can't even hear Aizawa's reply, as his mind is currently screaming at him now. Fuck. He thought they disappeared. He thought they were warped out of there, not whatever *this* is!

Their quirks were flickering out because they were *dying,* not being teleported away. They were being brutally murdered at the same time that Izuku was trying to fight for his life. The mere thought has him teetering on his feet.

"Kid." Aizawa reaches for him again, but Izuku jerks away.

"No! Why did you—?" His voice cracks, and he tells himself it's just because of his body recovering and not because of the reality being dropped around him. "Why didn't you tell me this? I—I said I was going to see where they went! And you—you just *looked* at me. And you… you *knew…"*

Did you not trust me enough for that? What did you think I was going to do?

“Hey, *calm down.* It wasn’t the right time. I was waiting until—”

“Until *what?”* Izuku asks, bordering on hysterics now. The dining room is too sharp, too real. His head feels like someone is taking a hammer to it. Like his insides are being cracked open and put on display for everyone to see. “It’s been almost a week since then! Have you known about this the entire time?”

But even as Izuku asks this, he thinks he already knows the answer. Aizawa saved him that night. There’s a high chance he would’ve seen those bodies if he went in from the top of the building.

So he must've been the first to know.

Izuku can tell just by the man’s grimace that his thinking is correct, and that’s—that’s scary. He doesn’t even know what to say right now, and the fact that Aizawa isn’t saying anything either makes him want to *scream.*

The boy shakes his head vigorously, as if to clear his mind, and picks up Missy and the discarded tablet almost as an afterthought. He needs out of this room and *far* from this hero’s presence. He can’t look at the pictures anymore, he can’t look at *Aizawa* right now.

He just needs a second alone so he can make sense of all this. He's not used to having these kinds of moments around others. He’s used to being alone. He’s used to breaking alone. He was allowed to act however he liked in the privacy of his own apartment. His own building.

How should he act here?

“Midoriya, hold on a minute, kid. Let me—”

Izuku ignores him and practically flees to the guest room, shutting the door with a little more force than necessary just after Sushi darts in as well. He doesn’t respond to any of the man’s calls and instead slides down the door of his room—not his room, he corrects, the guest room—before hiding his face in his knees.

His hands are shaking. Everything is shaking. He can barely breathe through the sudden tightness in his throat.

One of his palms jerks up and *pulls* one of his pillows toward him, and he clutches it like it’s a life jacket.

There's something bubbling up under his skin, over his skin, around him, and he thinks that it could be anger or even confusion, but he's well familiar with those, and this doesn't feel quite like that. His eyebrows furrow, his grip tightening on the pillow covering his face as he just tries to form some kind of rational thought.

Dead. Twenty-four. Gone. Just like that.

He recognizes those cuts. Those slices on the person's body. There was a pattern to it. God, he knows what this means but can't go any further into that thinking. A knife is being jabbed repeatedly into the soft part of his brain, carving out some of the most important parts, and he can't stop it.

Has this happened before? He can't remember, but he's sure it's never been as bad as this. Not even when he over-drank some of that extra strong alcohol that night.

And that thought is frightening. He doesn't even know what to do. There's nothing for him *to* do.

Izuku sits there, curled up in the smallest ball he can, fingers gripping the pillow so tight his knuckles are probably white. He tries to steady his breathing, as he feels like he's hyperventilating, and *god* he *knows* that's not good, but he's not even in the right state of mind to put an actual end to it. What did Kuro always say about this? About how to stop yourself from breathing too much too quickly? There was a little rhyme he taught Izuku, but he can't remember it now.

It's been years since then. And what a thought that is, huh? It's been years since he's been away from his caregiver.

His heart is still going a hundred miles an hour, and dammit Izuku can't stop the *fucking trembling!*

The world is too big and too small all at the same time, and the weight of the current situation has his chest constricting, now making it hard to even drag in breaths. He was breathing too much before and now he can't even suck in any air at all.

The smoke did this to him in that burning building. That, he can remember.

Blades so sharp they could cut through multiple layers of armor and then skin. The speed to slice not once, not twice, but three times before being countered.

Where has Izuku seen that before?

A paw touches his skin, and Izuku jerks, red sparks flying off his body. Missy meows in retaliation and jumps away, now sitting on the edge of his bed with Sushi and watching him.

“Stay!” He says as best as he can, though it comes out rough and garbled anyway. He stutters over the word a few more times before having to give up, and he shoves his face back into the now soaked pillow. He’s sweating bullets even though he feels so cold.

The chill in his room is like needles pricking at him from every angle. His ass is going numb from sitting so long, but he doesn’t even register it.

A few more moments pass and he can barely make sense of anything around him. The cats and the chill and the not-his room slip away, like a TV channel being turned. He feels stuck in a sort of glass box that he can’t break through. He can see the other side, he knows what’s *beyond* the other side—but he just can’t reach it.

And maybe the harsh truth is that he feels safer inside this glass box. He just wishes it wouldn’t make him feel as alone as this.

Because really he's never felt this inherently *bad* before. There have been other moments like this, he thinks, but this is different. Worse. More crushing. Something is *crushing* him. He would be crying right now if his mind would let him. His control is slipping, and he hates it. He hates it *so* much.

Instead of any more words, all Izuku sees in his mind are images. Memories he’s buried for a couple years now. More for peace of mind than anything. He’s buried them to tame his guilt.

Another stab at his brain. This one cracks at his skull. Opening it like someone would an oyster.

The shadows around him darken. They dance on his walls and make him realize just how much the room is closing in on him. There’s something there waiting for him. Someone. There’s a breath on the shell of his ear. It’s his, right? No. Maybe. He can’t tell.

His glass box is getting tighter. It’s pressing against him and going to break. He puts his hands up to stop it from going any more in and squeezes his eyes tight. The tablet he threw to his left lights up with a notification, but to him it just looks like a camera flash. A doctor’s

light.

Stop.

An unfamiliar voice cuts through the fog. It sounds like it's right there, but there's no one in front of him.

One for All is a live wire inside him. His palms are burning. Itching.

Steady now.

Another breath at his other ear. The pressure of the glass box being pushed against him decreases. The box is being… pushed away. He's just sitting there, contained. In a thankfully motionless, small area. And he waits.

Air is still hard to come by, so he holds it for as long as he can before forcing himself to drag some more in after exhaling. The seconds between breaths calm the sparking of One for All. He tries to occupy himself by thinking of the cats, of Missy and Sushi—who are both somewhere in this room, he just can't make himself move to see them—and All Might and everyone else, but those thoughts are sucked away almost as quickly as they had come, like a vacuum sucking up all the debris. It's leaving him with too much, *not enough.*

Yet, even in all this, Izuku is quiet. There are no tears or cries or anything of the sort, just forced breathing and deep-rooted fear and *cold, why am I still cold?* Sweat sticks to his curls and plasters them to his forehead, and another shudder wracks through him when the voices leave him.

He's not back here yet. He doesn't think he's truly in this room or apartment or even on this planet. Not quite. This is more of fabricated reality that he's been thrown in.

And what a sensation that is, to not be anywhere but in your own mind-created violence.

After what feels like hours but what could've only been fifteen minutes, Izuku slowly starts to come back to himself. An anchor has been tied to his ankles so he wouldn't float off into the sky. But now it's weighing him down too much.

He sucks in some steady breaths as Sushi and Missy rub themselves all over him in support, and he has to stop himself from pushing them away again because dammit he doesn't *want* that right now. He can't

handle that. The touch feels wrong. Eventually, though, his heart stops trying to jump out of his ribcage, and the world slowly comes back into focus.

The shadows aren't there, he assures himself. They're gone now.

He's still shaking, but he chalks it up to how cold it is in this room. Aizawa must've stopped calling for him a long time ago, as Izuku can't hear him anymore.

He can't decide if that's a good or bad thing.

Izuku needs to distract himself now. That seems to be the only thing he's been doing these past few days. There's nothing else to do, to be fair.

He just needs some control, that's all. The sharp pains in his chest disagree with that statement, but that's too bad.

After at least another hour and a half of just lying there and trying to connect back with reality, the boy reaches for the tablet he'd thrown off to the side, his trembling fingers unlocking it and opening the web. He doesn't feel up to messing with Nezu anymore. Maybe he should surf some of the heroes and villains' forums, just to catch up on his analyses, just to stop himself from thinking about whatever the *fuck* happened in the dining room.

To stop thinking of *him.*

He's exhausted, and he actually wants to sleep, but he can't. He knows that nothing good would come of it.

It's kind of ironic, though, that the first article Izuku sees has him shutting off the tablet and setting it back on the ground. Having already drained his storage of emotions for the day, he can do nothing but laugh drily at the words and pictures he'd just seen.

He shouldn't be surprised at all anymore. Just from the nature of the wounds on those bodies, Izuku can tell who they were given by.

'Ingenium stepping down! Hero Killer: Stain strikes again!'

That's Iida's brother, and Izuku remembers his friend (can he even call him his friend with how shitty Izuku has been lately?) leaving before the end of the Sports Festival. The timestamps match up, so this is definitely real. He knows that if he'd searched a little more or maybe

just browsed through the news channels on the TV, he would've heard about it.

The fact that neither Aizawa nor Yamada told him about this is telling.

And then another realization, this one much darker: *oh, he's started up again.*

He should've realized his old mentor would continue where he left off when that group started following him, especially when Stain left him that note that night on his desk. Izuku should've realized that simply ignoring things wouldn't make it all go away forever.

Running wouldn't either. He's learned that lesson.

Fuck. This is all Izuku's fault. So many things could have been prevented if he had only just been *better*.

He'll have to ask Yamada how Iida is when he comes back. But does he even deserve to inquire about that? Izuku has no right to, does he? Not with how he's involved, that's for sure.

The boy hugs the pillow at the thought and forces himself to get up on the bed. He's been on the ground for far too long.

(And if it takes four minutes for him to even build up the strength to stand up and make it to the bed, nobody will ever know.)

He's long since given up on entertaining himself with the tablet. He doesn't want to go on the web and see it all over again. He doesn't want to see his old mentor's face, he doesn't want to see those blinding white eyes, and damn it all, he doesn't want to even be *reminded* of that piece of his past.

It wasn't even that long ago, and that's what hurts. He's been trying to run from that part of himself, ashamed and entirely frantic. But it's as if his subconscious longs to simultaneously erase his past and run to it; to reach it before anyone else can. To reach it so he won't be hurt again.

I did this.

A shadow falls under the crack between the door and the fluffy carpet, and Izuku clutches the pillow tighter as two soft knocks sound out. Aizawa's voice comes from the other side, quiet and almost hesitant.

The change from before has Izuku surprised.

“Kid? I made dinner.”

Izuku doesn’t answer. This is obviously an olive branch, but he can’t even respond because he doesn’t know what he *could* say without making everything worse. He doesn’t think he could speak even if he wanted to. Missy jumps up and sprawls out right next to him, giving Izuku an excuse to focus on something other than the tightness in his chest when he begins to pet her.

There’s another knock. “Midoriya?”

“‘M not hungry,” he says, just loud enough for him to hear. The words come out rough with unuse. Sushi pushes his head into Izuku’s other hand, as if to provide encouragement, and rumbles.

Aizawa’s voice doesn’t change at all when he replies. “You’re gonna have to eat eventually. You didn’t have anything for lunch.”

The boy rolls over onto his back, causing the two cats to get up and sprawl across his stomach and chest. He doesn’t like the way the hero is acting like everything’s fine now.

There’s a beat of silence, and then a soft, quiet sigh. It’s more of an outtake of breath than anything else, but still. “We really need to talk, kid.”

Well, that would’ve been amazing say, Izuku doesn’t know, a week ago? Another jab, and Izuku pushes away those petty thoughts. Geez. When did Izuku start acting so much like his father?

Talk later? He wants to say, a proposal, but his mouth can’t even form the words right now. Not anymore. He missed his chance.

Aizawa waits another ten seconds before speaking again. Izuku can hear the forced calm in his voice. “Dinner will be in the microwave if you change your mind.”

Izuku concentrates on the feeling of Aizawa’s quirk moving away, and the moment he feels the man back in the kitchen he sits up, another wave of dizziness overcoming him.

He’s sorry, but what little pride Izuku has just won’t let his teacher see him like this. Especially not after Izuku so childishly ran off and hid in the safety of the guest room.

Only toddlers do that.

He knows, deep down, what he needs to do. It's pretty obvious.

Aizawa was *just* being nice to him yesterday and today; he was joking around and listening to the boy's ramblings, acting as if he actually understood him and his feelings—even promising to take him out on *patrol* despite any potential legal consequences!

He was distracting him. He was keeping him in the dark and being purposefully vague so Izuku would be as ignorant as possible, for he knew what would happen if the boy knew the truth. He knew what Izuku would *do.* And now, with those gruesome photos ingrained in his mind and appearing on the walls every time he blinks, Izuku thinks that maybe, *just* maybe he would've been better off not knowing after all.

"That will just make it harder to track them later. I've gotta stop them from trying to hurt anyone else."

A sudden, weird look. "Track them?"

Aizawa knew. He knew the truth then and didn't say a damn thing when Izuku mentioned them being alive. He kept it a secret by not saying anything at all, and that is absolute *horseshit.*

That stupid fucking bastard. Izuku hates him. He *hates him.*

Is he not privy to his own business? Is he not *worth* someone taking a little bit of time out of their day to tell him the truth? Izuku is never one to point fingers, and he's also never one to judge without knowing the full story, but this specific circumstance? This little event?

This might prove to be one of the only exceptions.

For what seems like the fifth time today, Izuku starts to pace, his steps awkward and shaky. His eyes dart around the dark room, nerves dancing all over the place.

A week. It's been almost a week since the incident, give or take a couple of days, and that's *far* too long. He's been relaxing here in this nice and welcoming *not-home,* eating food that he doesn't deserve and wearing clothes that don't belong to him—all while his old mentor is out killing innocent people once again. *Paralyzing* innocent people. And sure, maybe those twenty-four heroes and villains weren't exactly innocent, but it doesn't matter. They were killed because they went

after Izuku, and who could blame them for that? It's not like Izuku is anyone important. He's the only outlier; they can go after him and blow up his fucking building for all he cares, but the line is drawn when they hunt down other people.

Stain did it to protect him. He *killed* for him, which means it's Izuku's own fault that they're dead. He might as well have been the one holding those dreadful blades.

Shaking hands reach up and grasp at uneven hair, pulling at bottle-green strands. Fuck. Why? Why is it always him?

Izuku chokes on something warm and immediately twists to cough it out into the trashcan next to his bed. Red spots dot the bloodied tissues already in there, and he curses to himself. Emotions don't mix well with a sickness fueled by a petty quirk.

He stands there, half bent over the bin, eyes closed as more sweat trickles down his face and drips onto the floor. Everything is once again too much but not enough. It'll never be enough, he thinks.

And in a smaller voice, starved by a white-hot heat, a pouring stream of indifference and petulance, there's another thought: *might as well keep going if you can't run. Rule over what you already have. Reinforce. Keep the people safe.*

He uses his sleeve to wipe at his mouth as he straightens up. There's something demanding his attention at the corner of his eye, and his brow furrows when he turns to see what it is: a navy blue hoodie. It's hanging on the handle of the door, and Izuku glares at it. There's a pair of matching sweatpants in one of the drawers in the dresser, he knows. Yamada gave it to him after finding it in the lost and found bin at school.

What if I…?

Izuku grinds his teeth in frustration. He doesn't know why he's thinking about this all of a sudden, but now that the pieces are all there, egging him on, he knows that *this* is what he needs to do.

He forces himself not to think too much as he pulls on both items, making sure to fasten the slightly-baggy clothes so they won't fall off. He doesn't have his costume anymore, so this will have to do. The only other items he could wear are black, which honestly isn't the best option here. Black clothes stand out in all but the darkest of shadows, and that's hard to come by when you live in a city. Even at night,

there's always a light to shine on you. Navy blue is more likely to fit your surroundings when you're sneaking around.

And is that what he's going to do? Sneak around like some sort of rebellious teenager who's angry at their parents? Is this what he's come to? He's not going to run for good. Not now, at least. That would be counterproductive and stupid. Izuku just needs *out.* He needs some freedom, if only a taste of it.

Especially after what just happened.

Besides. He needs some more of his medicine from the club doctor anyway, right? Yeah. He can tell himself that that's why he's doing this.

He doesn't have a mask, but that can easily be fixed by tying up a spare shirt around his face. And isn't that weird? He never used to just have spare things sitting around at his disposal. He never used to have *anything* extra before this.

Hm. What are the chances that Aizawa has some contacts? He's a master at espionage and underground fieldwork, so the man must have some of that stuff around here. But the question is how Izuku will *get it.*

He can't just ask. That would be a suspicious thing to do. He might have a few pairs in the medicine cabinet, or perhaps in his room, but Izuku can't risk being seen around the house now. His last interaction with the man didn't end very well, and he knows Aizawa will probably want to talk to him about it once he sees him moving about —something that Izuku is *not* ready for. He's still too pissed and shaken up from whatever that was earlier.

Is he being petty? Yes. Is he being a stupid, childish teenager? Also yes. But that doesn't mean his treatment of the man is completely uncalled for.

Aizawa is being annoying solely because he's *trying* to be nice. He hasn't done anything to provoke Izuku or make him feel like he doesn't belong, and yet here the boy is, boiling with hate.

He's shown Izuku a lot of trust recently. He's given him a tablet with no restrictions, he's turned his back to him without thought or hesitation, he's let Izuku annoy him and take apart most of the kitchen appliances four times over, and he also hasn't pressed too much about what Izuku is hiding in his notebook and envelope. So Aizawa is

trying, at least.

But at the same time he's also shown Izuku the *least* amount of trust, which is why he *hates* him. He's being hypocritical.

"I don't trust your ability to know what's best for yourself."

Yeah, Izuku didn't forget about that stupid comment. If there's one thing Aizawa Shouta has, it's the audacity for sure.

It doesn't make *sense,* is the thing. Aizawa is disguising his own need for control by acting as if he actually cares about his student's health. As if he's truly worried and wants Izuku to get better, when in reality he just wants the boy where he can see him.

That's gotta be the only reason, Izuku thinks, because why else would Aizawa trust him enough to give him a tablet and turn his back to him, only to keep him locked up anyway? He's trying to create an *illusion* of trust. He's giving Izuku a false sense of security.

That's how they always get you. They entice you with small rewards and gifts just so you can stay right where they want you to. It's as they always say, Izuku guesses: *the best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure they never know they're in a prison.*

Adults do it all the time, sometimes even without realizing it, and Izuku hates that Aizawa has turned out to be just the same. He'd been hoping for the longest time that he wouldn't be, but in the end, when has the universe ever swayed in his favor? He doesn't know why he even bothered thinking he could have this one thing.

Hell, what makes it worse is that Aizawa has done the dumbest thing possible in his attempt to get Izuku to trust him more—he's gone to sleep every night despite knowing that Izuku could use that time to escape. He doesn't even lock Izuku's door. The locks on Izuku's window? They're not for him. He knows Aizawa isn't dumb enough to think those cheap locks would stop him, so it's obvious those locks are just for criminals trying to come in.

It seems as though Aizawa *expects him* to just not go out at night. As if seeing that he's been given this choice—this small sliver of trust—will suddenly make Izuku compliant.

And that might've been true just a couple of hours ago, but now the tides have shifted. Izuku is going to prove him wrong.

Deciding that he can do without contacts, as his green eyes are bright enough to be mistaken for fakes anyway, Izuku tries to think about what he should do. Without his support weapons he knows he'll have a harder time on patrol, so he'll have to prepare for that. But there *is* a way to get some more weapons, he remembers. The club has a sort of community chest in the back that not many know about, so he can grab some stuff there since he's planning to get his medicine.

Yes. That… that sounds good. A set-in-stone plan that he can follow without fail. He's used to this. He's used to following his own orders.

The multiple locks on the window prove useless against the power of One for All. Izuku pops them off easily after holding a blanket up to the area to muffle the sound, and he slowly inches up the glass. It's not too loud, so he should be fine. This should go off without a hitch.

So why is he *hesitating?*

The nightly breeze ruffles his hair and caresses his face when the window slides up all the way. The smell of the city is intoxicating, and Izuku feels his body tense up in mild excitement. He's been *waiting* to get out of here.

But still, Izuku can't help but pause with his hands on the windowsill. He can fit through; that's not the problem. The problem is that he doesn't know if this is a good idea now that he's actually about to do it.

What will Aizawa think?

Just do it. He won't find out.

But what if he does? What will he do then? Will his teacher be pissed and tighten the slack on his metaphorical leash even further, or will he just hand him off to someone else and wipe his hands clean?

Why do you care so much about what he thinks? Isn't the entire point of this to prove to yourself that you don't have to listen to him?

Well, yeah, but just because Izuku kind of hates the man right now doesn't mean he's lost his respect for him. Aizawa is still very much his idol, and he does care for what he has to say. And he's—he's never been *angry* at Izuku before, which is a very good thing, so why is he willing to risk changing that? Is he really willing to risk what little freedom he has now just to test the boundaries?

Don't be a wuss. The people need you, don't they? Or are you just lying to yourself and saying you're important when you're really not at all?

His chest tightens at the admission. He doesn't know who's talking right now. It could be himself or it could be an entirely different person—he wouldn't know.

It's just for a few hours. What's the worst that can happen? He's doing it for himself. It's not like he *wants* Aizawa to find out. And besides, Yamada has no reason to check his room once he comes back from the studio, so Izuku is fine. *Better* than fine. He's a wanted vigilante, for fuck's sake. He can handle this.

You say that and yet you're trembling like a leaf.

Izuku grits his teeth against the cold and waits, one half of his body in the window and the other half out. This is what normal teenagers do after an argument, right? Sneak out of the house to go fight crime with a variety of powerful quirks under their belt? Yeah. Sounds about right.

He remembers the newspaper Aizawa had thrown away this morning. He remembers seeing his masked face on the front page with bold words accompanying the profile: *Vigilante Missing for Days? The End of Rabbit!*

It's only fitting that the people have noticed his disappearance. He's never taken a full week off before. The last time he did that was when he got shot with that hollow point bullet, and even then he had made sure to be seen briefly once every day to keep up the act. He didn't patrol on those days, but still. All the people needed was a brief glimpse to think he was out and about.

Crime rate will rise if I'm not out there tonight. It's already been too long.

Something claws at his sweatpants, and Izuku looks down to see Missy hissing at him. Her fur is fluffed up, her ears flat against her head, making the boy frown at her. "Don't look at me like that! I am literally *so far* from being in the wrong this time, so keep the disapproval to yourself."

Missy just hisses at him again, retracting her claws to leap up onto the bed for a better vantage point. She crouches down, and Izuku only just has time to twist his body to catch her before she can leap straight out the window.

“Nope! It’s too dangerous to come with me. *Stay.”* He throws her back into the room, leveling her with one last glare before glancing at Sushi, who’s been watching the scene quietly with unimpressed eyes. “You both better not snitch on me or else you’re losing your petting rights for a day.”

And with that, he swings his other leg through the window and drops from the sixth floor, landing quietly on his feet with his heart thumping in his chest. This feeling is exhilarating. After nearly a week of being stuck in that stupid prison, the adrenaline thrumming through his veins feels like a drug that he just can’t get enough of. It’s what he’s been craving so badly for days now, and he can’t help but laugh quietly to himself as he springs up onto a few buildings further down the road, feeling the wind whip at his face as he runs.

His quirks are awake now. They’re not as dull anymore. They feel stronger, more *powerful.* The difference is huge, and Izuku moves faster through the air, testing out what he’s capable of. It seems that all this medication and resting has done *some* good—he’s healthier than he’s ever been. His sickness may be worsening, sure, but everything else? It’s all making him feel so *alive.*

Extract purrs in his mind, all too happy to finally be used this selfishly again. He extends his senses, almost tripping over his own two feet at the sudden sensation of *so* many quirks and powers bubbling around him, *teasing* him. His fingers twitch on their own accord, and Izuku’s smile slips from his face.

Oh. Of course this would be the case. He should’ve expected this to happen. His body and mind have gotten stronger, and now that his quirks have as well, he has some catching up to do.

Izuku breathes in the smell of fresh air right before taking a dive off of a larger building, the city lights whizzing past him in a blur of color and familiarity. This feels right. It feels normal. Out of everything that’s happened in the past few days, Izuku knows that this is the *one* thing he can control for sure. No one else has a say in what he does. Not when he’s out here.

He can start catching up on what he’s missed by doing what he was born to do. What he was *made* to do.

And so Izuku darts through the shadowed city and prepares for a fight.

Chapter End Notes

oh, sweet death. do not come for me yet

I was listening to this song on youtube while writing the bakugou scene. v very inspiring (not a rickroll this time haha *unless?)*
l

bird of prey

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bats hurt. They hurt a *lot.*

Not the winged bats, of course; Izuku loves those funky little night gremlins. He's actually talking about the bats that are used for baseball—the same kind that are also used to beat up innocent little vigilantes! Sometimes they even have nails in them depending on how festive the criminals are.

The guy Izuku is currently fighting seems to have the right mindset! His bat has sparkly pink screws jutting out from the wood, all rusted and dirty and covered in suspicious fluids. They're bent in such a way that they'll end up tearing your skin on the way out once they puncture you.

Tetanus, Izuku thinks, but make it *fashionable.*

Has Izuku ever gotten a shot for that? He can't remember, but tonight probably isn't the time to figure it out.

The crook rears back, the baseball bat cutting through the air as he aims for Izuku's head. His jawline is sharp and angular, and his chin makes up at *least* half the length of his face. He honestly kind of looks like Crimson Chin from that one really old cartoon.

Izuku ducks, backing away a little. "Strike one."

"That's not how this works," Discount Chin huffs, swinging again. Except this time Izuku sidesteps and sticks out a leg, sending the man stumbling forward.

"Strike two. One more and you're out."

The criminal curses under his breath and readies himself. "Stop playin' around, you Rabbit *fake!* You're not even supposed to be alive, dammit!"

"Fake?" Izuku's voice takes on a dangerous lilt, and he *yanks* the bat out of the man's hands in irritation, quirks buzzing. "Hey, now, I know I don't look so hot anymore with this shabby outfit on, but I'm

still me."

Is he, though? Something's changed, he can feel it. Whether or not that's a good thing is the question.

"Oh, yeah, brat?" Bastard Chin puts his fists up, towering over the boy in a lame attempt to intimidate him. "Fucking prove it to—"

The handle of the bat meets his temple with such speed and force that the guy drops like a sack of potatoes before he can even finish the sentence. If it were any other time, Izuku probably would've humored him, but he's on a time crunch right now.

He hauls the limp body out of the alleyway and uses the dude's belt to tie him to a pole, making sure to use some nearby mud to draw a frowny face on his forehead.

Criminals like King Chin over here don't deserve smiley faces.

He takes the bat with him, a slight swing to his step as he heads for a tall building to climb on. Not many people are out at this time, so there's less chance of people recognizing him while out on the streets, but that doesn't mean the risk is zero. His makeshift mask isn't exactly the most secure; it can be ripped off very easily.

Staying up high is a must—it's not like he wants some potential heroes to catch him wandering the near vacant streets. He's not looking for a midnight chase this time around, and he's also not looking for anyone to follow him to where he's going.

It would be in the best interest of everyone to not make the location of the Underground Club public knowledge. He's been stopping petty crime on the way there for about an hour now, just to get a feel for how the city has been looking since his brief absence.

Besides a slight increase in certain crime, more specifically in the robbery and assault category, nothing much has changed. Word seemed to have traveled fast, however, as apparently the entire criminal underground is under the impression that he's dead.

They *actually* think he's dead. As in, not alive. They think he's an expired teen. A deceased delinquent.

And *fuck*, why does he feel kind of affronted at that? Do they really think he's that incapable?

The only good thing about this is that now he gets to see the surprised looks on all the criminals' faces when he pops up out of nowhere claiming to be Rabbit. They don't believe him at first, but shortly after he starts fighting with them it becomes clear nothing's changed. He's Rabbit, after all, and that's not going to change anytime soon.

I'd much rather die.

He's going to the Club for a couple of reasons tonight.

Not only does he need his medicine again, as the pills from the hospital can only do so much, but he also needs some actual weapons. His fighting style is very limited as Rabbit without the help of support weapons. He can't always rely on his quirks, after all. Not unless he *wants* to be found out.

Izuku passes by a large shoe store on the way there, and he slows to a stop on the roof of a building across from it. Shoes. He needs shoes.

He's lucky he even remembered to change into those clunky shoes Yamada had given him before running. He was about to climb out the window in just his slippers to fight crime, and in hindsight, that wouldn't have been a good idea. He's done that before and will never do it again.

But fighting crime *using* slippers? Now that's a good idea. He needs his own pair for the apartment anyway, so why not take some? He's been using Aizawa's spares up until now.

Izuku is familiar with this particular company, too. His face is plastered on the wall just inside the automatic doors, and there's a caption under the photo that reads *SERIAL THIEF!! DO NOT ALLOW IN!!*

It's kind of funny how Midoriya Izuku is a bit of a legend among those poor employees. Total infamy.

But to be fair, Izuku has never stolen any shoes for himself before. Not from here. He would always give the stolen pairs away to the people who actually needed them, like the poor and the homeless. It can get really cold at night in this part of Japan, and while the streets and sidewalks are generally pretty clean, bare feet are still very vulnerable to cuts and infections.

Shoes are very important, and it's easy to overlook this when you've never had to fight for them before. So Izuku never really felt bad

about swiping a pair sometimes to give away.

He *still* doesn't feel bad about it. This specific location isn't family-run, and it's also not like it's a small company to begin with, either. All he's doing is eating the rich here.

And what's a few missing pairs of shoes, really? Close to nothing compared to the grand scale of things.

The store is closed, but Izuku knows that out of all the shoe places in this prefecture, this one has the shittiest security. It's the easiest one to break into by far.

Izuku gets in by using one of the old AC hatches on the roof, and he heads straight for the at-home section. There are no lights or other possible signs of life in here, so it's kind of eerie and ominous. He's gotta get out of here quick before a ghost decides to vibe check him.

He's pretty much searching blindly, so he doesn't know exactly which kind he grabbed, but two minutes later Izuku is cackling like a madman as he runs across rooftops, his new slippers tucked safely inside his hoodie. It's not like he's being *totally* selfish by stealing them—he can use them as weapons to help the public!

And plus, it'll confuse the hell out of all the criminals when he starts to attack them! Slippers will become a thing to be scared of once he's done.

He looks up at the sky as he nears the club, and the moon shines brightly down upon him. There are no stars this time around, at least not ones that he can see, so all in all it's a pretty standard night.

Izuku briefly wonders what would happen if he wrote his name somewhere in that inky blackness above. He'd be his own kind of star, and perhaps only then he'd be able to last forever.

Humanity glows, he thinks, just as stars do. Humans explode, too.

The club goes silent when he walks in, but it's not the normal kind of silence. They always go quiet upon his arrival, if only for a moment, but this time is completely different. All the members stop, mouths hanging open and eyes widening almost comically once they spot him.

Once they realize who the shabby-looking kid strolling in is.

Izuku feels their burning gazes on him as he walks to the front, and he

grips the baseball bat just a little tighter at the extra attention.

They obviously didn't expect him to show up so soon, if at all.

Dragon Lady is working the alcohol tonight, thankfully. Izuku gets along with her a lot more than he does with the others. She's not constantly passive-aggressive with him, at least. The others love to make fun of Izuku, and not in a teasing way, either.

It feels like they truly hate his guts sometimes. But that's to be expected, Izuku guesses.

People fear what they don't understand. And not even Izuku understands what's going on. How could a young, damaged kid like himself *ever* live up to the reputation that's tied to his name? To both of his names?

Rabbit is loved by the majority of the world, but what about Midoriya Izuku? Who, in fifteen years, has ever looked at Izuku and accepted him for who he is? With and without the mask?

Has Izuku even accepted that?

The woman raises a brow when he walks up, shaking her head slowly as he gives her an overly sweet greeting. She's counting through a large stack of cash, looking far too exhausted to be having to deal with him right now. "I almost didn't recognize you, Rabbit. Could've sworn you were taller last time."

Izuku balks. "Seriously? I've been missing for a whole week and that's the first thing you have to say to me? I'm feeling kind of unloved here."

She narrows her eyes. "You sound like a little girl. Did you break your voice changer again?"

"Oh my god. Why must you be so mean to me?"

His comment is skillfully ignored.

"You know, a few of the guys threw a funeral in here to celebrate your death the other day." She shoves the cash in the register and uses a rag to wipe at the horns on her head. The poison drips into a bottle on the table, and Izuku watches as she sets it next to the others for sale. "They start to get a little excited when you don't show up for a bit."

“Damn, and they didn’t even think to invite me to my own funeral?” Izuku asks with mock disappointment, inwardly wondering how many jobs he’d have to take in order to afford one of those bottles of poison. There aren’t many antidotes in the world capable of reversing the liquid’s effects.

That’s one of the perks of Dragon Lady’s quirk. It’s pretty much always lethal, and it only takes five minutes.

She gives him an unimpressed look. “They really thought you died, Rabbit. Or worse, got caught. It’s unlike you to drop off the face of the earth for a week without warning us first.”

Huh. Did Izuku get caught? Technically he did. A lot more people know about his identity now than before, but does that even count? If he truly got caught, he would be rotting in prison right now, not sitting here and chatting with club members without a care in the world.

Izuku laughs, and the sound of it is like sunshine reflected off broken glass. “You guys really have no faith in me at all, huh? I’m completely fine. Just needed a break, that’s all.” He stretches out like a cat over the counter, only because he knows she hates that more than anything. His bat knocks a few things off the edge, but he pays it no mind. “It was tiring being so underappreciated.”

The woman wipes the inside of a glass, not breaking eye contact. “You got caught, didn’t you?”

Izuku squawks at just how *confident* she says it, as if she has no doubt that what she’s saying is true, and he straightens up to glare at her. “Hey! Not so loud! That’s embarrassing!”

If the others get wind that Rabbit finally got snagged, he’d never hear the end of it. They might even use it against him for the rest of his life.

“Oh?” She sounds amused now. “How’d you get out?”

Yeah, yeah. Laugh at the expense of my suffering.

“It was an epic escape,” he deadpans, perusing the back wall for some weapons she might let him have for free. Despite her cold appearance, Dragon Lady is a sucker for the puppy eyes. “I had at least thirty heroes on me.”

There's a small wooden staff on the wall. It looks used and incredibly beat up, and it's not as high-tech as his other one was, but it would work.

"Uh-huh. Sure you did."

Izuku whines. "I did! You can even look it up on th$^{e\ int}e^{rne}$t—"

The words die in his throat, and it takes a second for Izuku to realize that his voice just cracked. Embarrassingly loud, too.

Oh. Just kill him now.

Dragon Lady slaps a hand over her mouth to cover her laughter, and Izuku hears a snort coming from behind him.

He turns to glare at the source of the noise, cheeks burning underneath his makeshift mask. Sitting just a table away is a man typing furiously on his phone, the light illuminating his face just barely in the dim room.

There doesn't seem to be anyone else who overheard, so that must mean this man was intentionally listening in. Which automatically makes him a suspicious person in Izuku's book.

When Mystery Creep looks up, his gaze immediately meets Izuku's, as if having already looked at him previously, and the boy tilts his head.

This bastard. He looks familiar. *Feels* familiar. Izuku knows him, he's sure. But from where? He doesn't have a particularly abnormal face, so it's not like he can identify him that way.

In fact, he just looks like some scroungy homeless man. Almost like Aizawa.

And almost like every other underground hero out there, a voice whispers in Izuku's mind, and the boy blinks in pleasant surprise.

It's not unusual for the more morally gray heroes to come here for supplies, or even just to have a place to hang out or find partners for missions. Lower-ranking heroes, especially underground ones, tend to flock to places like this.

So is this man a part of that crowd? Is he perhaps a hero like Eraserhead? And with that thought comes another unwelcome question: could he be an *acquaintance* of Aizawa's?

There aren't a lot of underground heroes in this part of the city, so it's likely that the ones that do exist here all know each other and have each other's contact. It's to have extra support, obviously, and also to have a few extra sets of eyes in a couple of different places at the same time.

So if there's an underground hero in here who might know Aizawa, or even just any other hero Izuku is familiar with…

Fuck. That would explain a lot, actually. Izuku isn't naïve. While he thinks of this club as a second home, he knows it's not perfect. It's tight-knit, sure, but there are always going to be a few leaks. A few bugs.

So the question is whether or not this guy is someone Izuku has to be wary of.

I shouldn't be here. Damn it all. Why am I overreacting like this? He could just be a nobody.

This could explain how Aizawa knew what the boy was doing that night after Izuku threatened that idiot here at the club—it was only a day into his personal search-and-destroy mission and the man still figured out he was going after the leftover villains involved with the USJ attack.

His analysis was that quick, too. Something that never sat right with Izuku. It just felt like his teacher knew even before that moment.

If one of Aizawa's *acquaintances* were present that day and witnessed Izuku's attack on that bastard club member, they would've heard what was said and thus realized what he was doing as well.

Perhaps said acquaintance *told* Aizawa.

No. Izuku can't go jumping to conclusions when he has little to no evidence. He's just going to work himself up like that.

The best thing he can do is fall back so he can do more research.

When he comes back to himself, the man is still staring, and he merely smiles a little when Izuku's expression darkens. Oh. This dumbass thinks he's funny. He thinks he's a comedian. Maybe someone should tell him that he's the butt of the joke.

Izuku's eyes go back to the phone in the man's grip, and he wonders if

he's texting someone. If he's texting the one person that Izuku really does not want him to be.

That would ruin all the fun tonight, wouldn't it?

He turns away, suddenly that much more serious. Dragon Lady's eyes flit back and forth between the two for a moment, obviously ready for possible drama, before stepping back a little to grab something under the counter.

"Doc left this here for you before he left," she says quietly, handing Izuku a white package. "Said he had a feeling you'd be needing some more."

Izuku takes the medicine with a dip of his head, stuffing it inside his hoodie with his slippers.

He can't say anything else, not with the lingering fear of the guy behind him eavesdropping, at least. Letting anyone else know about his, uh, *sickness* would be less than ideal.

"What if I traded in this bat for that staff over there?" Izuku asks sweetly, gesturing with his newly acquired weapon. "You think that's fair?"

For a few seconds, Dragon Lady just stares, taking in the terrible state of the bat in his hand. She must think he's stupid, and honestly, she's probably right. Izuku would trust her judgment over his own any day.

"You still have blood on it," she says, like that makes all the difference.

Izuku blinks, waiting to see if she's kidding. But then he carefully starts to use his hoodie to dab at the crimson spots in between the nails, making sure to use some of the iced water sitting in a glass next to him to clean off the dirt on the wood.

He looks back up at her appalled face and smiles brightly, even though she won't see it. "There! Looks brand new!"

"Jesus Christ, you really are batshit fucking insane." She takes the bat from his hand and promptly chucks it into the garbage can in the corner of the room, taking the staff off the wall to give to him. "Whatever, just take it."

Izuku is mildly offended at how his stolen weapon was treated,

especially since he swears he heard her say *this is you* right before she threw it, but he doesn't say anything on the subject.

After a few friendly conversations with some other members, spent with him mostly just assuring them that *no, I'm not dead,* and *yes, you're still in my will,* Izuku heads out of the Club.

The temperature is dropping dangerously fast tonight. He can see his breath easily now.

He doesn't know how it happens, but eventually, Izuku ends up standing in front of Kacchan's house. His feet seemed to just move on their own, leading him to this place almost as if on instinct.

Izuku is standing by the road with a cut on his forehead and a fresh bruise forming on his jaw, still slightly concerned that there's so much crime happening near his friend's house.

It took him longer than usual to get here, saying as he had to break apart a few fights and start a few of his own on the way, but that doesn't matter now. He's more concerned as to why the light in Kacchan's room is still on.

The explosive teen must be more worried than Izuku previously thought if he's still awake at this time. Kacchan does love his schedules, after all. He usually goes to bed before nine, so for him to be breaking that internal clock? It's a little concerning.

Should… should Izuku go in there? He already missed their weekly dinner the night before, so maybe he can make it up to him with a surprise visit. He could steal a cupcake or something from the store and climb in through the window to give it to him.

It wouldn't be the first time.

But does Kacchan even want to see him? Would he even want to be associated with Izuku after all this? The boy has been ignoring his friend for days now. A flimsy note doesn't count as good communication.

So would Kacchan even allow him to sneak into his family's house and fill him in on what's happening? Would he get *truly* angry? The kind of angry that has Izuku wanting to curl up in a ball and cry for about a thousand years afterward?

Or worse. Would Kacchan just be… silent. That dismissive type of

silence that Izuku swears is the bane of his existence.

The boy usually loves silence. He doesn't panic over most moments of quiet. But when *Kacchan* is silent, that's when he knows he messed up somehow.

Fuck. It seems Izuku is a master of overthinking tonight, huh? He's too scared to even go and see his best friend. It's kind of pathetic.

He owes Kacchan an explanation, and yet he can't even bring himself to give him that.

Izuku needs to learn to live without attachments. He should have never been this close to his childhood friend anyway—for a *variety* of reasons. He's constantly putting the boy in danger.

But maybe that's why Kacchan has always been a little different than everyone else. He resists Izuku's efforts of pushing him away and never fails in telling him that he's worth holding on to, even when Izuku is acting like a complete idiot.

Even when they both know that Izuku is better off being cut loose.

He turns and walks away from the house, his steps feeling weighted somehow. It's like his body has gone numb, and it's not just because of the chill in the air.

Kacchan will have to wait a little longer. The city is calling his name.

What people don't know is that Aizawa Shouta is a stress cleaner.

He doesn't like things being dirty or otherwise grimy, which is a surprise given how he looks most of the time. But to be fair, Shouta was homeless for a few months when he first started out as an underground hero.

Sleeping on benches and inside alleyways isn't a foreign concept to him. He still remembers what it was like having to go through that; he still remembers the less than ideal places he had to stay at. It was fine,

of course. *He* was fine. But that doesn't mean it didn't suck any less.

Perhaps that's why he doesn't like dirty things. It's not that he's a germaphobe or that he's squeamish or something, no. He just prefers not to live in an unclean place when he has the chance.

So whenever Shouta gets upset or just can't seem to stop stressing about something, he cleans the apartment.

Thoroughly.

It's kind of funny how he puts more effort into cleaning his home than he does in taking care of his appearance.

And it's also funny how fucking *dumb* Shouta can be. He's a literal dumbass. If you look up the word moron in the dictionary, you will probably see his face pictured next to its definition. He's *that* level of stupid.

He's fucked. He's totally and irrevocably fucked.

This is why he isn't good with kids. He doesn't know how to handle them. He doesn't know how to *talk* to them.

Midoriya probably hates him now. He wouldn't blame him, of course, but still. All he had to do was communicate with his student and all of this would've been prevented.

Stupid, he thinks angrily, shoving the rest of the files into their respective folders. *Should've talked to him about this. He had a right to know.*

He had a right to know about everything, seeing as it's *about* him.

The kid is in his room right now, most likely still awake, and Shouta hates that he still doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to fix this. If there even is a way to fix this. How do you come back from this level of betrayal?

He calls it a betrayal because he knows that that's probably how it feels to Midoriya. He told him that he'd work on building their trust, that he'd always be there for him, and yet Shouta has been keeping him in the dark about a ton of important things for a week now. Midoriya only found out about one of them by accident.

That doesn't seem like a two-way bridge of trust. It seems more like

Shouta is an authoritative ass who doesn't bother explaining things to the other party.

Dammit. He screwed up real good this time.

He tries to distract himself by cleaning off the rest of the dining table, moving to the living room when he's finished.

It's hard, is the thing. Having to help a child so strong yet so vulnerable like Midoriya. So fierce and passionate yet so caring and meticulous in everything he does.

Shouta would take a moment to watch the kid sometimes while working on lesson plans for the class. Sitting at the dining table or on the couch, Shouta had a clear view of what Midoriya was doing most of the time.

He remembers looking at Midoriya and noting how the boy would constantly look at every detail in the room and catalog it. Almost like he was committing it to memory. But why? Why would he take the time to do something so… mundane?

Just in case, Shouta guesses. Just in case he'd ever need to make an escape or need to know the exact layout of the apartment.

Or maybe it could've been for comfort. To know that amidst this chaos, he at least knows *something* concrete.

Midoriya said he was homeless for how long? *Just* a few years? The kid had one hundred percent control over his life while homeless, as sick as it sounds. He could go where he pleased, do whatever he wanted, and patrol when and where he felt like it.

Without someone there to reign him back in and care for him, Midoriya suddenly became much less of a child and more of an adult exposed too soon to the cruelest part of the world.

And it sucks. It sucks that he had to be by himself and take care of himself, especially since, in Shouta's opinion, he was barely even surviving.

Hizashi told him that same night what his apartment looked like. He told him about all the gritty details. He told him what was in the kid's fridge—well, what *wasn't* in the fridge, and he told him how there was a ton of burnt cat supplies and yet a severe lack of burnt *human* supplies.

The kid had prioritized his cat instead of himself. And honestly, did Shouta expect anything else from him?

Midoriya is a child, but he's also not. Shouta isn't *that* dumb, at least. He knows that he isn't quite a child with everything he's been through, so why does he keep *treating* the boy like he is? Why does he keep wanting to protect him from the truth, even subconsciously? Even when he knows it's a bad idea?

Maybe because it's easier to fall back on that. Maybe because it's easier to keep things from Midoriya instead of having to deal with the emotional fallout that will inevitably result from him telling the kid everything.

Shouta isn't good with kids. He's a teacher, sure, and it's not like he hates children, but he just isn't cut out to be one of those figures that people look up to. He's seen a ton of his students cry before, and he's been the cause of a good portion of those.

Some of those times were well-deserved, and some of those weren't.

The point is that he's just going to screw this all up even more. He took away Midoriya's control, knowing how badly that would end, and didn't even tell the kid *why*. He left him in the dark and just expected him to be okay with it.

And now he has to deal with the consequences of doing that.

Shouta feels guilty for a lot of things. He's guilty for not taking a lot of time to actually talk with Midoriya this past week. He's been home for five days, and how many times has he actually interacted with Midoriya?

Short, snarky conversations and clipped greetings don't count. When has Shouta actually taken some time to *talk* with him?

The short answer is he hasn't.

Hizashi always gets on him about how he always throws himself into his work. Even now, Shouta rarely takes breaks. The principal made it clear that he wouldn't have to do any work for the school as long as he was watching Midoriya, so why did he choose to do some painstaking analysis and work anyway?

His husband isn't even home during the day and yet he's made more progress with Midoriya than Shouta has. And that's—that's just

wrong.

It's becoming clear that he needs to put in some more effort.

The katsudon is still sitting on the counter, cold and untouched. Shouta only ate a few bites of his own portion, knowing he wouldn't be able to stomach much more.

He gets up and puts Midoriya's plate in the microwave, knowing he won't come and get it now. He was hoping the kid would, as he still needs to eat, but it seems like he's just going to stay in his room until morning.

Katsudon is Midoriya's favorite food. Shouta remembers being told that random fact on one of their patrols, and he's glad he didn't just forget. Making it was supposed to be the start of an apology of sorts, and it was also supposed to be a kind of olive branch.

Plus, it's apparently good to make familiar meals for kids coming from unstable environments.

Hizashi sent him an article a few days ago about parenting troubled teens, much to Shouta's embarrassment. Recently orphaned or fostered kids need boundaries and comfort, and since Shouta doesn't know what to do about the first one yet, he decided to attempt the second one.

But Midoriya didn't even end up trying the comfort food, which just goes to show how badly Shouta screwed up.

Even Hizashi agreed. His husband is just as upset, having been informed of the situation when Shouta texted the man in a panic asking what to do.

Of course he went to go see Tensei right after work on the night this would happen. He should be here right now. He'd know how to handle this.

At the reminder of what happened to their friend, Shouta grits his teeth and swipes a hand down his face. He has a headache now. Nothing's going to get done as long as he's stressing this badly.

He needs to feed the cats. That's something he can do. It's way past their normal feeding time anyway. But when Shouta pours the food into their bowls, only Meatball and Pickles come running.

The other two must be in Midoriya's room.

Great. Shouta really doesn't wanna have to knock on the door again. He knows Midoriya won't want anything to do with him right now. He might just make it worse. Missy and Sushi should be fine, right? They most definitely would've heard the rattling of the food and started yowling if they wanted out of the room.

They've never had any qualms about doing that before. But still, Shouta just… he doesn't feel right.

He's relieved when Hizashi finally comes home half an hour later, and he feels some of the dread inside him dissipate once they greet each other and Shouta realizes he's not alone now.

"How was it?" Shouta asks, taking the small box from his husband's hands and setting it on the table. His arms cross on their own accord, and he tells himself it's only an instinctual thing, not something he's doing as a self-soothing method.

"Work was the same as always," the blond groans, shrugging off his leather jacket and kicking off his boots. "My manager's new husband came by today and thought he could boss us all around, so that was annoying. But what can you do?" Hizashi drapes himself over Shouta, putting nearly all his weight on him as he presses small kisses to his neck. "And Tensei is alive and kicking just as well as he can be, all things considering."

Shouta didn't expect any less from Tensei, though he's glad to know his friend is alright after living through such a nightmare. And speaking of living nightmares…

The hero shakes his head and pulls back to point at the box. He doesn't want to think about Stain after what's just happened. "What's that?"

"The hospital was selling sweets, so I bought some dorayaki before leaving," Hizashi says softly, his fruity cologne wafting around Shouta. "Midoriya loves sweet stuff, so I thought the listener would enjoy some right now. He's still in his room, right?"

Shouta nods, already peeking inside the box to look at the delicious desserts. Perhaps this'll be enough to coax the kid out. "Should be. I haven't seen him move around yet."

He can't stop the worry that bleeds into his voice as he speaks, and he ends up gripping the edge of the table tightly with a sour expression. He should calm down. If anyone can fix this, it's his husband.

Hizashi kisses him again, the smallest comforting gesture, and takes the box with him as he heads for the hallway.

For the millionth time, Shouta is glad that at least one of them is good with kids. Who knows where Shouta would be right now without Hizashi.

He listens with his heart thumping inside his chest as Hizashi knocks on Midoriya's door and says something to him, and he has to force himself to turn away so he doesn't have an internal meltdown.

Shouta distracts himself with wiping down the kitchen counters, keeping his mind busy with something other than the obvious elephant hanging around in the apartment.

He trusts Hizashi. If he butts in or something, he might make it worse.

Not even a minute later, the voice hero is emerging back from the hallway, a small frown tugging at his lips.

"What is it?" Shouta asks, raising a brow. Hizashi still has the dessert box in his hand, unopened.

"He's not answering."

It's that one sentence, that simple, innocent-sounding phrase, that has Shouta freezing in place. Because that's—that's weird. He had thought Midoriya would've answered Hizashi of *all* people, as he's arguably closer to him than he is to Shouta himself. He knows the kid barely sleeps as it is, so there's no way he isn't awake right now, especially after what happened.

But there's also no way that Midoriya is *ignoring* Hizashi. He might do that to Shouta, but not to his other teacher.

So which is it? Midoriya would never be so dismissive of Hizashi, and he also probably wouldn't fall asleep so soon after an argument like that. None of this is making much sense.

Well. Unless he *isn't* ignoring him.

Shouta suddenly gets that *feeling* again. The same one that had him nearly stumbling in panic that day at the hospital. The same one he felt right before finding out about Midoriya's disappearance.

He's moving before he can figure out why. His senses are screaming at

him, and it's like his mind has filled up with static as he walks quickly down the hall and past Hizashi, ignoring his husband's confused look.

Fuck. He has *that* feeling. The feeling that tells him something is off, that something isn't right. His gut is doing backflips now, as if warning him, and he just knows that this feeling isn't unwarranted. His instincts are never usually wrong when it comes to stuff like this.

Ever.

Shouta raps on the door, the fear that's gripping him making him shift anxiously on his feet. Hizashi is right beside him now, looking equally as concerned.

Please just be asleep. Please prove me wrong.

"Kid?" Shouta listens for any sign of life behind the door, but there is none. Even Missy and Sushi, who are supposed to be in the room as well, don't make a noise. He tries again, more frantic this time. "Midoriya, I need to feed the cats. Can I open the door for a second?"

But all that's heard is a faint breeze coming from inside the room. Everything else is almost eerily still. Come *on.* Is he ignoring them both completely now? While Shouta wouldn't blame him for it, he'd have to admit that it would be unexpected. The teen is usually so—

Shouta stops dead, fist still poised over the wood, having been ready to knock for a third time.

Wait a minute. Breeze? Why is he hearing a *breeze?* He doesn't remember there being any fans in the kid's room.

Blood roaring in his ears, Shouta wrenches the door open with a new kind of desperation burning inside him, and the first thing he sees is both cats sitting innocently on Midoriya's bed, tails curled around their paws as they stare at him.

Oh. So they were keeping quiet on purpose. Shouta doesn't know how he should feel about that.

And—and the *window.* It's pulled open almost halfway, allowing the slightest bit of wind through to ruffle the cats' fur. The locks that were automatically installed aren't there anymore, and Shouta suddenly gets hit with a fresh wave of déjà vu.

Shouta moves first with Hizashi right behind him, the blond hero

frantically calling Midoriya's name as he starts to search the closet and rest of the room.

But Shouta already knows what to do.

He crouches down next to the kid's bed and feels under the bed frame for the secret compartment he just *knows* Midoriya would have found and put to good use.

His hand touches leather, and he pulls out the thick notebook he'd seen Midoriya write in once before, and also the same manila envelope he'd questioned him on just a few days ago.

Two of the kid's most prized possessions, Shouta thinks, and they're not even gone.

"His stuff is still here," he says curtly, "so either he's planning on coming back or—"

"Or he was taken," Hizashi cuts in, now rushing to the window and prying it all the way open. He cranes his neck out, making sure Midoriya isn't just on the roof of the building or something.

And that's when the panic really starts to set in. It's already been a few hours since Shouta last checked in on him, so Midoriya could be anywhere by now.

He shoves his student's stuff back, deciding that now would *not* be the right time to snoop even if he wanted to.

Shouta heads back to the living room while Hizashi checks the rest of the house, calls growing more desperate. But they both know it'll be futile.

Shit, kid.

He pulls on one of his work boots, snagging his capture weapon off the hook on the wall and wrapping it around his neck quickly, almost choking himself in the process. "I'll contact Tsukauchi," he says aloud, nearly stumbling in his haste. Hizashi is emerging from the hallway and getting ready to move, too.

His phone. Where is his phone? He needs it.

"If he left on his own he might be doing his usual route," he continues, hopping on one foot to yank his other boot on. "I'll check

his most frequented areas first. Hopefully Tsukauchi can send some people out to help."

Hizashi pulls on a hoodie that was thrown over the back of the couch, grabbing the car keys from off the coffee table at the same time—he's not as quick as Shouta is on his feet, so he'll have to take the car. He doesn't have a capture weapon to help him maneuver around. "I'll check his old place just in case. Nezu has eyes all over the city, so maybe he can help, too!"

And this is familiar. The business part of it. The professional, hero side of it all. Shouta's been with Hizashi for so long now that their teamwork is purely muscle memory.

He never imagined they'd have to do this for Midoriya, though. Not like this.

Where the fuck did I put it? I just had it, dammit!

His eyes scan the apartment wildly, searching for his phone, but then Hizashi is pressing it into his chest and pushing him towards the front door. But right before the pair can run out, Hizashi stops for the briefest of moments, looking extremely distressed.

"Do you think it's my fault?" He frets, glasses sliding down his nose. "Could this be him pulling away? Have we been neglecting him?"

"Neglecting?" Shouta echoes drily, fingers trembling as they clutch one end of his scarf. "You're around him so much I wouldn't be surprised if he's running to get *away* from us."

The blond looks even more pained at that, and Shouta winces. Okay, that was harsh. He didn't mean to say that. He was just trying to reassure him that this isn't his fault, that Shouta is the only one to blame, but it seems his nerves are getting the best of him. His worry is turning his thoughts to mud.

"I'm sorry, 'Zashi. This is—I don't know what—"

"Hey, hey, it's okay." Hizashi grips his arm tightly, emerald swirls meeting shining obsidian. And Shouta has always appreciated those eyes. They're busy and intelligent and just as honest as the smile his husband wears when they're alone. They say far more about Hizashi's character than any of his shouted words ever could on television. "We'll find him, Sho. We have to."

Yeah. They have to. Because Shouta doesn't know what he's going to do if they don't.

"Get back here you little shit!"

Izuku cackles, stuffing the chicken wing in his mouth and nearly choking on it as he runs out of the store, the KFC employee stumbling after him. "No!"

The family meal bucket in his hand jostles with every stride, but Izuku pays it no mind. He bends down to slurp on the soda tucked in his elbow, dodging the wooden sandal that flies his way. It seems the man who runs this location isn't feeling very generous tonight.

"Damn you, Rabbit!" The manager curses, voice echoing down the streets. "Were the biscuits not enough for you?"

Izuku just chortles happily and powers up One for All to jump onto a neighboring roof. This is the second time he's stolen from KFC tonight. The first time was just thirty minutes before this, when he decided he was in the mood for one of their dry, oxygen-depleting biscuits after a few hours of patrolling.

It was only a matter of time before he inevitably came back for more.

You can't blame him, either. Fighting criminals takes a lot out of you, and KFC is just so fucking good that he can't help himself. Besides, it's their own fault for not sponsoring him. Rabbit is already one of their biggest supporters.

Not to mention the fact that Izuku accidentally sponsored them at the UA sports festival. He's surprised he hasn't been sniped by someone from their legal team already.

He rummages through the bucket, finding a thigh and chomping down on it. He's hungrier than he's been in a long time, and he's not sure if it's because of his body being the healthiest it's ever been or because of the medication he'd taken a bit ago, but he's feeling *great*.

Izuku hangs his legs off the edge of the building and swings them, currently devouring the godlike pieces of chicken inside the bucket. The shirt on his face now has a hole on it, courtesy of a nice dagger he'd swiped off some random criminal, so now he can eat in peace. He doesn't have to worry about someone spotting him without a covering.

The boy frowns suddenly. What the hell? Is he short a wing?

He's supposed to have ten pieces in the bucket, according to the building's menu, so he should have six left, considering he's only eaten four.

But there's only five left, which means they *shorted him a piece.*

And seriously? Only nine pieces instead of ten? Those workers should be ashamed of themselves. He should go back in there right now and ask for a refund!

Izuku grits his teeth and slurps on his soda angrily. *This isn't what I didn't pay for you bastards.*

Whatever. The KFC drama will have to wait, as he hears more crime happening nearby. He'll just have to leave a bad review on Yelp or something.

It turns out that the slippers he stole from the store are actually All Might slippers! They have the number one hero's signature hair spikes on them, and they also follow his color scheme pretty closely!

And honestly, can you truly feel guilty about stealing All Might slippers that happen to double as projectile weapons? No. Not at all.

Izuku chucks one of the slippers at an attempted bank robber, yanking it back with *Pull* after it clocks the guy at the back of the head. He throws it again, and this time it soars past Mr. Robber and ends up slapping the criminal in the face when Izuku pulls it.

"Okay, what the *fuck?"* Mr. Thief exclaims, whipping around to glare at him. "There's no way that piece of shit slipper is doing that by itself. Is that your quirk or somethin'?"

He blinks at him and lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "It's a boomerang, actually."

"Hah? No it's fucking not!" Mr. Lowlife takes a step forward, as if

squaring Izuku up. “Ya think you can make a fool outta me? I ain’t stupid.”

“It’s basic physics. You see, anything’s a boomerang if you throw it hard enough. You just gotta have the right angle—”

Izuku cuts himself off so he can sidestep the blast of orange air that erupts from the guy’s mouth, and *ooh,* he thinks, a wannabe *fire-breather.*

And so it goes.

It’s amazing to be out and about again, even if he doesn’t have his normal costume and supplies. That’s just something he’s gonna have to get used to for now.

See, he’s always gotten a sort of euphoria from being Rabbit. There’s a certain thrill to it that he can’t quite explain. It’s like a drug that he just can’t get enough of, and if he’s deprived of it for too long he might go crazy.

Being stuck in an apartment for a week may not seem like a long time, but it certainly is compared to what the boy is used to.

Speaking of drugs, Izuku should’ve known things were going too smoothly. Something just *has* to fuck up for it to be considered a regular patrol, huh? That’s how it always is.

He walks down the street with his mouth full of some more chicken, trying to think of ways to quietly sneak back into the apartment without getting caught.

And that’s when he hears some scuffling in a crack between two restaurants, making him pause. Izuku is probably only a few miles away from the apartment now, and the moon is high up in the sky. It must be just after two in the morning, which is when he usually stops patrolling.

But what’s one more fight? He’ll make it quick this time.

He clutches his leftover KFC with one hand and wields his staff in the other, slipping inside the tight alleyway with all the grace and confidence of a pro hero.

That’s rule number four of Late Night Vigilantism: never show a criminal your weakness. The worst thing that could happen is them

knowing you're scared, or even the least bit apprehensive.

It's dark, so he can barely see, but *Extract* has him covered.

There are three of them; he feels two quirks crowding around someone else, backing them further into the alley and away from the entrance.

A potential mugging, it looks like. Something that's not going to slide in Izuku's book.

He moves closer, steps deadly silent as he listens in on the conversation going on a few yards ahead.

"I told you I don't have anything! You already looked through my wallet and found nothing, so what could you possibly get from me?"

The first voice is young. The boy can't be any older than eighteen, Izuku thinks, which makes him either a third year in high school or someone who's just starting out in college.

"Well, you've got a nice-looking watch on your wrist," the figure on the right says, moving closer to the boy. None of them seem to have noticed him yet. "That'll get us a pretty coin on the market, won't it?" She looks to the left at her partner, who's only a tad bit taller than Izuku himself.

"Sure, I guess," is what she gets in reply. It's said enthusiastically, and it's pretty obvious that this one is probably more of a man instead of a boy. He's got a deep, gruff voice that Izuku wouldn't mind listening to in regards to ASMR.

He'd pay this man to read him a book before he goes to bed.

"You want—you want my *watch?"* The first boy hesitates, hand moving over his wrist as he likely contemplates what to do. "But my grandpa gave this to me!"

Ms. Watch Snatcher closes the distance between them, pushing the teen against the wall. "And I'm sure he'd understand it if you passed it on to us. Come on, I'm not waiting here forever."

Huh. Interesting. This is like a scene straight out of a bad drama show. Izuku wishes he had popcorn on hand right now so he could start throwing it at the muggers and booing. That would be really funny.

But he guesses he'll have to settle for something else this time.

"Couldn't you guys have thought of some better lines to say?" Izuku asks, smiling to himself when all three of them twist to stare at him, wide-eyed in confusion.

Izuku takes his chance while the two muggers are still spooked, and half a second later the dirty All Might slipper is falling to the ground after hitting its mark in between the man's legs. The dude drops like a rock with a hiss of pain, and Izuku cackles.

"Who the hell are you?" The girl asks, standing protectively in front of her fallen partner—and also enclosing the watch-wearer in.

He briefly meets the boy's gaze, hoping to reassure him. It seems like he's doing well in staying calm, so Izuku isn't too worried.

She hasn't rushed me or used her quirk. Is she waiting for something?

One for All recoils in his mind, almost as if it's disgusted by the idea of what the robber's quirk could be. Hm. Izuku wonders if One for All can feel the nature of quirks alongside *Extract* now, and if so, he's a little concerned as to why he hadn't realized this before.

At the mention of its name, *Extract* ripples underneath his skin like an overly excited puppy, eager to get in contact with the power before him. Izuku wouldn't really compare it to a puppy, though. *Extract* is more of an overgrown beast with three heads that demands the souls of the innocent and gets pissed when it doesn't get its way.

Think Cerberus, but add in an angsty teen to the mix. That's how he'd describe *Extract.*

The thing is it's getting stronger now. The urge. That *pull.*

He'd been so shaken up and on edge inside the apartment that he never really thought much of it before, but he realizes now that he is definitely getting stronger. At least quirk-wise.

It's harder to push away the feeling now. The entire night, there's been this voice at the back of Izuku's mind, and it's been just *begging* him to take everything he could get his hands on, to take all the energy he could steal. And now it's back again, this time much more powerful than before.

Izuku *wants* the quirk that this girl has. It's almost intoxicating the

more he thinks about it, and he doesn't even know what it is yet.

"You don't know who I am?" He asks sardonically, feigning hurt. Izuku gestures at her partner, who is only just now scrambling back to his feet. "Should've thrown that slipper harder at him then."

Movement catches his vision, and he makes sure not to break eye contact with the pair in front of him even as he watches the older boy try to edge away. *That's right. All eyes on me. Don't look back at the teen you just tried to steal from.*

It's surprisingly the man who answers this time, an angry edge to his words. "Rabbit. I heard you were supposed to be long gone by now, but apparently not. You're like a cockroach, you know." A tilt of his head. "Just won't die, no matter how many times someone squashes you."

Hold on a minute. Seriously? He's gonna compare him to a cockroach?

"Now that's just mean," Izuku pouts, making sure he has a good grip on his chicken as he starts to spin his staff around threateningly. "But Ms. Grinch over there was right. It *is* getting late, and I don't have all the time in the world right now. So why don't you two just get out of here so we can all call it a night?"

Bingo. The teen has just slipped out through a small crack in the back. Now Izuku has more room to work if he needs to.

And apparently he does, as he can't even open his mouth to form his next sentence before the pair rushes at him with surprising speed.

Okay, straight down to business. He's alright with that. He just needs to set down his chicken first.

Izuku leaps onto the wall and uses it as a springboard to crash into the girl, sending her sprawling to the ground. He moves off her just in time as her partner descends upon him.

He has a mutation quirk, Izuku thinks, noting the pointed ears and sharp, almost glowing eyes. *His movements are too precise, so he might be able to see in the dark.*

The man doesn't hesitate even for a moment, sending a fist Izuku's way. It's knocked away with his staff, and the vigilante then jabs him in the chest with it, dropping into a crouch and twisting to sweep his legs out from under him while he's winded.

Extract buzzes in warning, and Izuku whips around to deflect the girl's punch and maybe send one of his own her way, only to freeze suddenly.

His blood is roaring in his ears now, his mind screaming at him. It's like lightning has settled over his skin and turned his insides to mush, his stomach coiled up tight like a spring.

Take it.

He sees the blow coming in slow motion, and Izuku's eyes widen. His heart stops, if only for a moment, and Izuku is left hanging in between a world of destruction and peace, all in his mind.

Take… it? Take what, her quirk?

She doesn't need it. She hasn't even used it yet, so it's obvious she doesn't even like it. You know she won't mind.

No. That's wrong. She *will* mind, they always do. And even if she wouldn't now, he knows she'd regret it sometime afterwards. Besides, doing it would be *immoral.*

What are you waiting for? Just do what you need to do for once. This is why you are always so unhappy.

Is it?

He blinks, and the world speeds back up to its normal rate. The fist is an inch from his nose, promising pain, and what happens next is almost instinctual.

Izuku jerks back, eyes flaring red as his palm latches onto her exposed wrist, his other hand dropping his staff and reaching up to grip at another spot on her arm. There's a fire spreading through his veins now, a strong rush of adrenaline washing over him that has him nearly falling over at its sheer power. *Extract* is chanting and squirming, all while Izuku is *burning* in his own body.

And this… this feeling is horrifically familiar.

There's a flash of white and a pain so sharp in his mind that Izuku stumbles back, gasping under his mask once he processes what the fuck just happened. He searches for it instantly, that quirk, and almost cries in relief when he finds that it's still intact and *not* inside him.

He didn't steal it, though it was a close thing. He was separated before the transfer could complete, though that doesn't make his sudden guilt dissipate.

Izuku looks up, muscles tense, and meets the girl's gaze. She's staring at him, horrified, as she rubs at the red marks on her arm.

He put those there, and he knows they probably still hurt like hell. Izuku *hurt* her.

The vigilante takes a few steps back, the world swaying around him. Mr. Night Vision is up now, standing beside his partner and watching him with furrowed eyebrows.

Oh. Oh no. Why is Izuku starting to feel… weird? Why are his thoughts slipping away from him?

He's getting lightheaded, and his heavy limbs make it feel as though he's drunk, even though that should be entirely impossible.

What's happening to him?

He recalls the flash of light that went off right before they broke contact, and he gasps when he realizes that that wasn't caused by any of his own quirks.

Huh. The girl must've activated her power out of fear to stop Izuku from doing whatever he was doing to her.

Her power being whatever it is that's making Izuku feel like he's tripping on LSD again.

Wait, *again?* He only just barely stops himself from laughing. He's never taken LSD and probably never will. It's dangerous, and he never wants to take the chance of Aizawa finding out about it.

She has a drug quirk? He really does laugh this time, the sound bubbly and slightly hysterical.

The guy glares at him and clears his throat. "Listen here, pretty boy —"

"Why is pretty boy even considered an insult?" Izuku interrupts, frowning at them both even though they probably can't see it. He's losing himself now, his fragile mental state not helping to fight off the drugs one bit.

He can barely remember why he's here, or what he just did.

There's a pause. Both thieves glance at each other for a moment before turning back. "It's—"

"Call me a pretty boy again." He points at the guy thief, and honestly he's not asking. He's ordering. "You'd be doing more than my parents ever did."

It's these two's turn to be frozen in place, looking entirely uncomfortable.

Their confused faces make Izuku giggle again, and he puts a hand on his hip, the action making his head swim when he picks up his bōstaff and bucket of chicken. "I wanna be the prettiest boy anyone's ever seen."

"Hey, wait, are you good?" The man scratches at the back of his neck with a knife. Where he got it, Izuku isn't sure. "You're getting a little weird."

Before he can respond, Lady Thief's eyes widen comically. "Oh, shit. So that *was* me. I used it."

Oh? Izuku would like to know the juicy details of whatever that entails so he can file the information away for later, please. He has a feeling it might be important.

"What? You *used it?"* Her partner looks worried now, voice becoming a little more high-pitched as he repeats his question.

I'm feeling left out. AINA, play Despacito.

"I don't know! Just look at him! He looks drugged!"

The two friends start to argue with each other over whether or not she accidentally used her quirk on him, but Izuku is too busy staring at the dirty cement wall beside him. There's a caterpillar on there. It's spiky and colorful, and Izuku thinks that maybe he should bring it back to Missy, as he knows she *loves* caterpillars. She might eat it, but it's the thought that counts.

"Are you kidding me! Rabbit is a minor, isn't he? You just drugged a minor!"

"It was an accident!" The girl defends hotly, gesticulating wildly with

her hands. “He was hurting me! What, you think I did it on purpose?”

The guy shakes his head. “Fuck this, I’m out. I’m not getting ten years in prison over this dumb little shit. The cockroach can die on someone else’s terms.”

Izuku frowns as they both suddenly retreat, wondering why they’re not bothering to finish him off when they were so willing to go through all that trouble in the first place. He tries to stumble out of the alley while calling out for them, only to trip and face-plant a few steps into it. His bucket falls out of his grip, sending the leftover thighs and wings skidding across the pavement.

No! His—his chicken!

He tries to crawl forward, but his limbs are now filled with lead. His mind is going numb, too, and he can’t think straight anyway. His metabolism must be trying to fight whatever this is, but it’s not like these are actual drugs, so not even *Boost* can help him out now. It’s—it *is* just a quirk, right?

The boy hopes so. Real drugs are bad. All Might would not approve of his current position. If he saw him right now he would give him that look that’s almost as bad as Yamada’s disappointed eyebrows, and that’s saying something.

He sits there for a second, the cold and suspiciously wet concrete soaking through his hoodie and making him shiver. He falls back over the rest of the way and doesn’t bother trying to get up this time.

Nobody should talk to him right now. He’s mourning.

“My family meal,” he whispers sadly, now alone in the alley, and that’s the last thing he says before the drugs take over completely.

Keigo smells fried chicken.

And it's funny, really, how the winged hero seems to have a sort of sixth sense when it comes to stuff like that. It's not like his quirk allows him to have a better sense of smell, of course, it's just that Keigo *really likes chicken.*

Could this infatuation of his be considered cannibalism? Probably. But Keigo will deny it until his dying breath, as chickens can't fly. He can't be a cannibal if the creature he's being grouped with can't fly. It just doesn't work.

That's flawed logic at its finest, but Keigo will still die on his hill.

The smell of chicken is getting stronger as he flies lower to the ground, a rare burst of sudden excitement overtaking him. Oh, he fucking *knew* there'd be a chicken place around here. He just had a feeling there would be.

He's been flying around and completing some last-minute tasks for hours now, so he figures he deserves a bit of a break. He never usually allows himself to take a breather, as he really can't, not with his line of work, but he can make an exception for the chicken.

His superiors won't mind if he makes it quick.

Besides, it's not good to fly on an empty stomach. That'd be like driving a car while drunk or something. It wouldn't be very good.

And speaking of potential alcohol consumption, Keigo stares down at the seemingly dead teen at his feet, blinking in mild surprise.

He doesn't know how he got here, actually—standing at the mouth of an alleyway and staring into the darkness, but there's not much he can do about it now.

Honestly, what the fuck is happening? Who the fuck even is this?

It looks like an expired adolescent, in Keigo's own fine opinion. Like a dead, wet rat that just crawled out from the sewers and tried to scurry around for a bit before ultimately keeling over right here on the sidewalk.

More importantly, though, it *doesn't* look like the KFC building Keigo thought he was flying to. It looks like an incoming headache.

But his nose didn't fail him completely, it seems, as Keigo spots a bucket of fried chicken on the ground next to the teen, half of its

contents spilling out over the asphalt. He steps further into the alley and bends down to take one of the wings off the ground, blowing off the grime before taking a bite.

Sue him, he's hungry. And besides, he's eaten worse things before.

It's hard to tell exactly what happened here, but he's sure of one thing: a crime has been committed. That part is obvious. If the slain fried chicken didn't clue him in, the still-very-dead figure on the ground did.

Keigo crouches down, taking another chomp of the free food. He pokes at the teen, wings ruffling a little when a short burst of wind picks up. When he gets no response, the hero grabs the back of their shirt and tilts them up, trying to get a good look at whoever it is—only to immediately drop him and *squawk*.

Because that looks like someone Keigo is *extremely* familiar with, and that's not meant to be taken in a good way. What he means by familiar is *I've had about fifty compulsory conferences about you, and sometimes I got so bored at them that I felt like plucking out my own feathers and tickling the person next to me to death with them.*

He whistles to himself, turning the boy onto his back. "Well, look what the cat dragged in. Didn't think I'd be seeing you this soon, and I *definitely* didn't think our first meeting would be like this."

His musings don't get a reply, not that he expected one. This kid is out of it.

Yes, this is definitely Rabbit. It may be dark out, but Keigo has better eyesight than most, and he *never* forgets a face. Especially not one that he's seen almost every day, either from the news or just somewhere at the Hero's Commission.

Rabbit is a bit of a nuisance to them. They hate the vigilante almost as much as they're intrigued by him.

The teen doesn't have his normal costume on, so that's probably what threw Keigo off at first. His face mask is nothing more than a tied up shirt, and the wooden staff that sits a few feet away from the kid is a complete downgrade from what he used to have, but it's still undeniably Rabbit.

Which begs the question: what the *fuck* is a wanted vigilante doing in a dark alley at ass o'clock in the morning? Passed out, no less, where

everyone and their moms can stumble upon him and take advantage of his unconscious state?

Like Keigo, for example.

The mask looks to have fallen down a little on one side, as the blond can spot a few freckles dusting Rabbit's cheek. The shirt is on the edge of his nose, and it doesn't look like it's rigged or anything like his last face mask was rumored to be.

Keigo could do it. He could just grab the fabric and pull, and then he'd be greeted with the sight of Rabbit's true face; it'd be that easy.

He never forgets a face, so all Keigo would need to do is go back to the facility and use some of the resources the Commision has to offer, and *bam.* He'd have a name come morning time.

And it's funny, he thinks, how the boy before him has been a public menace and all around nuisance to the government for around four years now, and yet no one has been able to figure out his identity. At least, not anyone that's come forward about it.

But of course Keigo manages to have that chance presented to him in a pretty little package one random night, having literally just stumbled upon him while searching for some fried chicken.

It's almost as if it's meant to be.

Keigo starts on another chicken wing, not minding that it's cold. There's a few things he could do right now, but at the moment he's just content in stealing the teen's food. Rabbit is automatically a friend in Keigo's book if he enjoys KFC as well. The least he can do is wait a little bit.

It doesn't take long, as only a couple of minutes later, the vigilante is sitting up almost mechanically, as if rising from the dead. "I'm alive!" He declares, the two words slurring together, and okay, *wow,* he sounds even younger than Keigo thinks he is. He must be around fifteen or sixteen, or maybe even younger.

"Oh, sweet!" It really is good that he's not dead. A world with one less KFC lover would be a dark one. And plus, the last thing he needs to deal with tonight is a juvenile who smells vaguely like fried chicken and death disturbing people who walk past the alleyway. "Sup, buddy! You doing alright there?"

The teen turns, and bloodshot emerald eyes pierce into golden ones. That's something that's changed, too: the color of his eyes. They were red previously, meaning that Rabbit used to wear contacts, just as Keigo suspected.

He gets a quiet giggle in response. The boy reaches forward with a hand and boops his nose, with Keigo surprisingly letting it happen. "Birb," the vigilante says, and promptly passes out again.

Not wanting him to hit his head on the concrete, Keigo catches him and lays him gently on the ground, briefly thinking about how adorable that was. He immediately shakes his head to clear that thought, however.

Now is not the time to get attached to a wanted vigilante.

His phone buzzes suddenly inside his pocket, and he stifles a groan as he fishes it out and answers the call. "Heyo."

"Did you find him?"

Keigo frowns, looking down at the boy who's softly snoring and now cuddling up next to his leg. He… is not his target. *Rabbit* is not his target, yet it's funny that his superior phrased the question like that given the circumstance. "The weapons broker was taken in an hour ago. I'm on a separate mission right now."

It's not a lie. Keigo doesn't have a reason to lie about this.

"Whatever it is you're doing, make it quick. We need you back here in an hour."

The man hangs up on him before Keigo can respond, which isn't new but still slightly irritating all the same. He lets out a small, annoyed breath as he stuffs his phone back into his pocket. He gives a mock salute and whispers a sarcastic *yes, sir,* into the night, sighing once more.

Rabbit looks to be going in and out of consciousness, which would line up with what Keigo is starting to think happened to him. He didn't smell any alcohol on his breath or label Rabbit as acting very skittish, so it must be a quirk doing this to him rather than a willing decision or action.

He thought so. He didn't take the boy as one to just do drugs or drink alcohol recklessly—at least, not while he's in costume. Who knows

what he's like under the mask.

Keigo decides to start searching him, finding nothing more than a couple of cheap knives, what looks to be a very *important* medicine bag, and a… dirty All Might slipper? His gaze flicks up, and he spots a matching one a little further into the alley.

He retrieves it using one of his feathers, not wanting the pair to be broken apart. He knows just how annoying that can be.

After securing the boy's belongings inside his jacket, Keigo hoists Rabbit up onto his feet and takes off into the sky, deciding that he should probably take him somewhere more private if he wants to talk to the kid. The quirk should be wearing off soon, as most drug quirks eventually do.

He's surprisingly light for someone so strong, and Keigo's eyes narrow at the thought that the vigilante is probably a little underweight. Seriously, who's been taking care of this kid?

Keigo tuts, still holding him tightly by the armpits. "You disappear for a week and come back looking like this? I've got a feeling you're not supposed to be out here, kid. Highly unprofessional, if I do so say myself. What would your parents say?"

The boy stirs, and Keigo nearly drops him when the vigilante kicks out with a foot. "I'm flying," he mumbles, causing Keigo to smirk.

He raises his voice to be heard over the wind. "You sure are, buddy! I don't think you should look down, though. Why don't you look up instead? You can see the stars this high up."

Rabbit just scoffs, voice suddenly becoming more serious. "Stars don't exist. Those are just the holes poked in the container so we can, ah, *breathe."*

Damn, what kind of edgy emo-lord did he pick up tonight? The vigilante kind, it seems.

Keigo can still hear him mumbling to himself the entire time he's searching for somewhere to land, and to be honest it's quite funny.

"I don't trust birds," the freckled boy says. "Fuckin' hollow bones. Suspicious. What're you hiding in there?"

It's said with such tenacity and seriousness that Keigo busts out

laughing and nearly drops the kid again. “Love,” he says cheekily.

“Fuck! *Shit!”* Rabbit curses, his arms jerking around in annoyance as if he’s angry he didn’t think of that before. “You’re right. Fuck!”

He goes back to dangling limply from the number three hero’s grip, kicking his feet out a little as he stares down at the city in awe.

“I think I love you already, kid,” Keigo says, spotting one of his old favorite training spots and diving for it, smiling at the happy noise it elicits from the kid.

When he makes it into the abandoned facility, he realizes he probably could’ve picked a cleaner spot. There’s dust and torn up boards everywhere, and there’s no light. He doesn’t go here often anymore, to be fair.

He sets the boy down on the ground and goes to find the switch. There’s a generator on the roof, and it was working a few months back, at least, so he hopes there’s still some electricity left.

A faint yellow light illuminates a small space in the middle of the clearing after flipping everything on, and Keigo turns back to Rabbit, his smile instantly dropping, because—

“What.”

The boy is lying on his back on the floor, unmoving, and for half a second Hawks thinks he’s actually dead, as he can’t see his chest rising or falling.

He steps closer but is stopped in his tracks when Rabbit suddenly sits up, gasping for air, hand on his heart.

Well, that was quick.

“What the hell just—” Rabbit cuts himself off, eyes turning into saucers when he catches sight of the number three hero just standing there a few yards away, and he jumps to his feet instantly, tripping as he does so.

The quirk wore off, but he’s still frazzled. He needs to take it easy.

Rabbit bumps into a table that just so happens to contain some of Keigo’s old weapons that he’d left here after training one day—which, okay, is *definitely* Keigo’s fault. He sees that now, as Rabbit is now

holding up a pretty nasty looking blade, movements frantic, and he looks like he knows how to use it.

The hero remembers seeing a video compilation of the vigilante's pretty impressive knife work, and he raises his arms placatingly. "Woah, woah, kiddo, I'm not going to hurt you."

You're not my assignment, anyway.

Rabbit blinks owlishly, the makeshift mask barely hanging onto his face now, especially after the flight. And now that the light is hitting him, Keigo can see more of the vigilante. He notices the darkness under the boy's striking green eyes, the cuts and developing bruises on his face and arms, and he frowns.

He's a lot smaller in person. It's hard to believe that this boy is the nationwide sensation known as Rabbit, someone who's rumored to be almost as fast as Mirko and Keigo himself and almost as influential enough among the public to be considered the next All Might.

This teen in front of him doesn't look like any of that. He just looks scared. Unsure.

"You're Hawks," he starts, "the number three hero. You also double as a spy and infiltrator for the government because of your emotional intelligence and physical potential."

He makes sure not to show the pleasant surprise on his face when the boy mentions the spy part. Not even most of his fellow colleagues know that, so he wonders how he got that information.

Rabbit is definitely as all-knowing as everyone says. He has more information than he probably knows what to do with—more information than he *should* have.

Keigo flashes a grin, all teeth, and lowers his arms. "Yeah, kid. And you're Rabbit, right? Your work is pretty impressive."

"You're going to arrest me."

"Nope." He shakes his head. "I just saw you sitting alone in an alley and wanted to help you out. You got hit by somebody's quirk, so I brought you here for privacy. Do you remember any of that?"

Rabbit's eyebrows furrow, and it's likely that he's opening and closing his mouth multiple times under the mask. Keigo can see something

moving there.

He's thinking, maybe? No, he's surprised.

"What did you do with my stuff?" Rabbit stutters out, the knife still raised threateningly.

Keigo ignores the question only because Rabbit ignored his first. He's always wanted things to be even in life, and this is a prime example. "You're not used to heroes doing this, huh?"

He seems to allow the change in topic pretty quickly. Either that or he's just too scared to point out he did it. "Ah, no, actually. They don't like me that much."

Keigo chuckles good-naturedly and moves closer to him, strides open and clear to see.

The teen's eyes follow his every step.

He's jumpy. In all the videos Keigo has ever seen of him, he's not like this. He's confident and badass, not this mess of a vigilante in front of him.

Something must have made him this way. Is it the quirk he got hit with? Maybe he's just shaken up by being near the number three hero. After all, Keigo should be bringing him in right now, not doing whatever this is.

A week is a long time. *You had a lot of people believing you were dead, so what happened to you, kid?*

He keeps walking until he's about a yard away from the boy, and Rabbit doesn't make a move to stop him. His body is coiled tight, though, like a spring that's about to release. One wrong move and something could go terribly wrong.

Keigo knows this, but he's also teetered the line of chaos and normalcy his entire life, almost as if it's a sport of some kind, so he doesn't find the looming *what-if's* threatening.

"What's your name, kid?"

"I'm not telling you that."

Ah, so now he's confident. Cool.

“That’s alright,” Keigo reassures with a shrug, voice cheerful. “Just making conversation. You doing good? I need to make sure you’re not too hurt.”

Need to, because he’s a hero, and that’s what heroes do. Whether or not he actually cares is irrelevant.

“I’m fine,” he mumbles, dropping the knife back onto the table, and Keigo agrees easily.

“Thought you’d say that! You are pretty strong.” He reaches past the boy, eyes never losing that artificial spark, and picks up the dusty first aid kit. “But I do need an excuse to brush up on my medical stuff, so you’ll have to bear with me.”

Keigo is slightly surprised to find that he hasn’t been stabbed yet, considering how close he is to the vigilante.

He grabs some ointment from inside the box and dabs it on a bandage, eyeing the cut on Rabbit’s cheekbone.

The hero reaches out to check the wound, smile still plastered on his face, and two things happen at once.

Rabbit jerks back, eyes wide once more, proving Keigo’s thoughts right. He must’ve seen the motion as Keigo potentially going for his mask, which shows he’s not as fooled by the number three’s acting as most are.

And at the same time, there’s a large shift in the air. Keigo can feel it because of how sensitive his wings are, and he can *feel* the newcomer entering the warehouse from the right side with impressive speed.

He only just has time to bring his wings in to shield his face as a pair of black boots come flying toward him. He flies back, twisting in midair to face his attacker with his wings spread out, but then—then he loses all feeling in his feathered appendages.

It’s like they’re suddenly dead weight, because *oh,* he can’t even move them anymore. His wings are *useless.*

When Keigo rights himself and looks up, now halfway across the warehouse and in the shadows, a black figure is standing in front of Rabbit, poised in a defensive stance. Gray tendrils hang in the air like ribbons above the newcomer’s head, blocking the vigilante completely from Keigo’s view.

And then it hits him.

“Don’t take another step,” the figure growls out, voice low and deadly. There’s a flash of light, and Keigo spots a medium-sized blade in the person’s hand. A blade that looks sharp enough to cut a leg clean off.

Or maybe a wing.

A cold chill runs down his spine, and Keigo is faintly aware of the knife that sits heavily inside of his own jacket, ready to be used for cases just like this.

If he can’t deescalate the situation, he’ll be needing it.

Upon closer observation, the man is dressed in baggy black clothes and dark boots, and if it weren’t for the signature capture weapon and yellow goggles, Keigo might have mistaken him for a homeless man.

A *scary* homeless man.

“Eraserhead?” He asks, dipping his head so his face is shown in the light, not willing to move any more just yet.

He knows the hero in front of him won’t hesitate to cut him up for not heeding his warning.

There’s a few moments of silence, and Keigo notices Rabbit’s head poking out from around the raven-haired man’s body, only to disappear yet again when he gets pushed back behind the other hero.

As if that would be enough to erase the boy from Keigo’s memory. He almost laughs at the thought.

“Hawks?” Eraserhead grumbles, voice still rough and full of warning, though still sounding slightly unsure.

“The one and only,” he jokes, taking that as permission to start moving forward slowly. “What are you doing here?”

Eraserhead—no, *Aizawa,* he remembers, straightens up, his capture weapon falling back into place around his neck. His quirk stays active, however. “I can ask you the same. You’re far from your normal route.”

“Got assigned another mission. You know how it is.” He waves the comment off, continuing to walk back towards them in a show of open kindness. “Didn't think you’d be up this early, though. I thought your patrol ended over an hour ago? If it even is a patrol night, that is.”

His gaze slides over to the space beside the underground hero, and he doesn't miss the way Aizawa tenses just slightly. *Ah, bingo.*

Aizawa just raises a brow, and just like that, Keigo is shut out from being able to identify his emotions. The man before him has always been pretty difficult to read, but now he's just closed himself off completely at the prying. "It's a busy night," he says, voice a low rumble. "What do you expect?"

Keigo nods in agreement, but his eyes once again return to the kid being hidden away from view. "It seems you've gathered a fan club, eh, Rabbit? I should've expected that, given your charisma and all. Very impressive, kid!"

The vigilante peeks out again, but this time he steps out so he's standing beside the underground hero yet still a little bit behind. He's obviously evading Aizawa's attempts at pushing him back once more.

Ah, he's got you on a tight leash, doesn't he? I wonder how you two met.

It's obvious this isn't their first meeting.

Aizawa shifts some more, his eyes twitching and hands flexing. "What are you doing, Hawks?"

In other words, what *will* you do?

Blunt as always. Eraserhead never disappoints. "Don't be such a downer," Keigo complains, rolling his eyes in faux irritation. "You don't have to worry so much. I'm not going to snitch. The kid was just coming down from a drug quirk, that's all. Figured he wouldn't want somebody else finding him, right, kid?"

Somebody who's more of a stickler to the rules than Keigo is. Somebody who wouldn't hesitate to hurt the wanted vigilante the moment they got the chance.

Rabbit nods, albeit hesitantly. Keigo can't blame him; he wouldn't trust himself in his position either.

Aizawa studies him blatantly for a long moment, expression giving nothing away, before seeming to find what he was looking for. His Erasure finally lets up, hair falling back down in waves onto his shoulders, and Keigo just *knows* his eyes must be hurting right now. "I'll hold you to that," is all he says, and Keigo feels some form of satisfaction build up in his chest from the sentence, from the almost-

warning.

And at that, Eraserhead steps forward and slides his knife back into the belt around his waist. He turns to give Rabbit his full attention for the first time since he flew in here, but Keigo isn't naïve. Just because Aizawa isn't staring at him doesn't mean he's not aware of him.

He's probably *painfully* aware of him. Aizawa is a skilled pro hero, so he's definitely multitasking at the moment, possibly in attempts to make Rabbit feel better, too.

The vigilante's eyes were flicking back and forth between the two, as if expecting and dreading a fight. As if confused as to why they were just talking and not beating the living shit out of each other.

Honestly? Keigo is a tad bit confused, too. He just wanted some KFC. How it came down to all *this,* he'll never know.

Keigo is left standing there to watch as Aizawa turns his back completely to him before moving his hands quickly in front of Rabbit. The movements are precise and filled with purpose, and is he… *signing* to him?

Oh. He didn't even know that Eraserhead can do sign language, but it makes sense. He's also being very smart by doing that, as expected, since Keigo would be able to hear them anyway even if they whispered. His feathers are just that sensitive.

This way, with Aizawa's back blocking his view, Keigo doesn't have a clue what they're talking about. And it seems that Rabbit can also sign as well, as the vigilante's head snaps up, like he's ready to argue with whatever is being said, before a sharp shake of the hero's head and more precise hand movements has him deflating.

Their dynamic is interesting. They seem like they're close, but in that Keigo can also see a sort of a barrier there, evident in the way Rabbit was resisting Aizawa's attempts at hiding him. A mentor and mentee, mayhaps? Or something more familial?

And has this always been a thing, or has this relationship started just recently? It can't be that new, though, as Aizawa is harboring a wanted *criminal.* They've gotta have some kind of background together for the man to take such a risk like that.

His phone vibrates for the second time, probably as a reminder. Dammit. It'll take ten minutes to fly from here to the compound, so

he'll have to leave soon if he wants to make it before his hour is up.

And things were just getting good, too.

Keigo takes the slippers out of one of his pockets and walks over to hand it to Rabbit, ignoring Eraserhead's glare at the side of his head.

(The winged hero hopes he's witnessing the aftermath of teenage rebellion, because *fuck yeah, stick it to the old people.)*

He pats Rabbit on the back with one hand, using the other to easily slip the bottle of pills into his hoodie pocket. He'd taken it out of its paper bag to muffle the sound as much as possible from Aizawa.

He has a feeling Rabbit isn't supposed to have it. And yet he can't help but feel like he *needs* it.

"Sorry for leaving your staff back there," he apologizes heartily. "Couldn't exactly travel with it while carrying you. But I've gotta get going soon, so how about I walk you two a little ways home? Think of it as a special escort!"

It's said like a tease, but he's really not asking.

He doesn't wait for a reply as he turns and strolls for the entrance with his hands stuffed inside his pockets, wings fluttering in a show of mild excitement.

It's not like the pair have anything else to do but follow. They could've left right after Keigo said he wouldn't tell anyone, but they didn't. Aizawa must've been trying to make *sure.* He was being cautious.

He's curious as to how his older colleague found them both so quickly, but that question will have to wait. It's not the right time.

What he said to Eraserhead before wasn't a complete lie. He won't snitch on them, and he also won't reveal any information he might've gathered on them to the public.

Even if he could ruin the other hero's life by bringing this all to light, and even if he's a little annoyed that his talk with Rabbit was cut extremely short.

The point is that Keigo would've had no qualms in doing so any other time. The only reason the hero and vigilante duo are allowed to walk

away from this is because Keigo wasn't directly told to take the boy in tonight.

Rabbit wasn't his mission, and as of this moment, he *still* isn't. He has more important things to take care of.

Besides, all good things come to those who wait, right? That doesn't apply to every circumstance, at least not to Keigo, but this is one of the times where it actually works. It'd be better to gather more information first before doing something rash. And that information may come in the form of a crumpled up, empty prescription bag in his pocket.

He's not letting Rabbit go just because he genuinely likes him, no. Waiting for a better opportunity will prove to be more beneficial than doing that.

And if he can get some amusement out of it by watching Rabbit continue to be his vigilante self until then, well, that's just an added bonus.

Aizawa is shaking.

It's almost painfully obvious that he is. The man's hand is gripping Izuku's shoulder, as if afraid to let go for even a second, and Izuku can't really blame him.

He can't help but stick close to Aizawa's side on the way back to the apartment, not minding the weight on his left shoulder at all.

He's not *scared,* thank you, he's just being cautious. Hawks is a very intimidating figure.

The number three hero may not be as tall or powerful as someone like All Might is, but what he lacks in these categories he makes up for in speed and reputation alone. His skill levels are off the charts, and that's not even taking into account all of the advantages his quirk

gives him.

He doesn't flaunt it much at all, but Izuku knows the hero is highly intelligent, both emotionally and logistically. Hawks promotes a carefree and jovial attitude during his public speeches and appearances, and oftentimes he comes off as a little rude because of this, but even when in the middle of this act the winged hero never fails to stay vigilant and alert.

Izuku doesn't miss the way Hawks' eyes will sweep over a crowd during an interview, almost as if scanning for something. Danger, perhaps, or maybe just some brewing trouble. Most pro heroes do that, sure, but with Hawks it's different somehow.

As if the trouble he's searching for is of a far different kind than the kind the others look for.

It's weird and kind of unnerving, because the Hawks everyone sees is lively, expressive, and highly personalized—and thus very far from what the pro hero must really be like underneath all that serenity and equanimity.

He claims to be bad at reeling himself in, but if he's as great an actor as Izuku thinks him to be, Hawks must actually possess complete control over his facial expressions and body language, which would then make him an *extremely* skilled liar.

Well, either that or Izuku is looking into things that aren't there.

The boy is glad that Aizawa is large enough to serve as a sort of barrier between him and Hawks while they walk. The blond's mere presence is suffocating right now, at least to Izuku.

This may also be because the vigilante is scared out of his mind for what might happen next, but the point still stands.

Hawks feels *large,* much larger than how Endeavor felt to Izuku that day at the Sports Festival, and also much larger than how the Hero Commission *still* feels to him.

It's scary.

They're still talking, Izuku realizes once he comes back to himself. Aizawa is making a point to continue the conversation Hawks had started, which is unlike the normally quiet man. It's to distract the younger hero, perhaps, or maybe even just to make sure the direction

this talk is going in isn't riddled with traps.

And speaking of directions, Izuku has no *fucking* clue where they're going. He's only technically been to the Aizawa-Yamada household once, as he hasn't been allowed to leave since he first arrived, so he doesn't exactly remember where it is from here. He could probably find his way there if he were closer to it, but now he's lost.

He is sure, however, that this must be the *long* way there, as he doesn't remember it ever taking this long.

Aizawa is dragging this out just to spite the number three hero and probably to trip him up, and he's not trying to hide it one bit.

"I have to say," Hawks says, his wings *accidentally* whacking Izuku in the head when they stretch out. Whether it's in a show of strength or nonchalance, the boy can't tell. "I never expected to see you again so soon, Eraser. Especially not like this! You've changed a ton since our last mission."

And at this, Izuku perks up. An Eraserhead and Hawks team-up mission? Seriously? Izuku would have paid good money to see that—good money he doesn't have.

It's hard to imagine Aizawa working with someone like Hawks. Izuku wonders how their mission went.

"It wasn't even a year ago," Aizawa says simply, voice slightly muffled by his capture weapon. "Nothing's changed."

A year ago? Dammit, Izuku would've just missed it then.

Hawks laughs, and it's only now that Izuku takes note of the almost musical quality to his voice. His words have a kind of cadence to them that reminds him of dancing in the rain. Or maybe running would be a better metaphor. *Running* in the rain.

"Ah, you're right," the younger man concedes with a grin, wings folding back in on themselves. "That scowl of yours certainly hasn't changed one bit. You just look more dead inside than before, that's all. And besides, you never told me you had a kid!"

Izuku, who is still dying over the *dead inside* part, chokes on air. The hand on his shoulder squeezes briefly, and the boy notes how Aizawa tenses up even further at the comment.

The situation is tense. Izuku has to fight back the urge to make a joke to lighten the mood, figuring that his input wouldn't be appreciated here.

Again, this is the number three hero they're talking with. They can't be fooled by his laid-back personality.

Hawks has caught a wanted vigilante, and there's no telling what he would've done to him had Eraserhead, another *pro hero,* stepped in.

Aizawa can get in trouble for this. A *lot* of trouble. Hawks must know this, so why isn't he saying anything? Is what he said before true? Is he actually going to let Izuku go?

The number three hero talks through the silence, and Aizawa doesn't say a word back to him for most of it this time. He'd completely ignored the whole kid comment, and Izuku doesn't know how to feel about that.

That large hand is still resting on his shoulder, the weight becoming something nice to focus on. Is this a comforting gesture, Izuku wonders, or just to make sure he won't try to run off again?

Either way, it's getting harder and harder to gauge what Aizawa is thinking right now. Is he angry, or is he too preoccupied with Hawks to even care about him and what he's done?

He remembers feeling the rush of air above him. Remembers how his arm nearly popped out of socket when he was yanked back by Aizawa's capture weapon. His teacher came flying in from out of nowhere, and the fact that he caught *Hawks* by surprise? A hero who's dubbed the fastest man alive?

That just goes to show how skilled Eraserhead is. Sometimes it's easy to forget this fact.

Izuku remembers that feeling he got when seeing Aizawa in front of him. The man had one hand gripping his knife, the coils of his scarf drifting toward the ceiling of the warehouse, and the other hand outstretched behind him to make sure Izuku stayed out of sight.

And he was trembling, even then. Aizawa was *shaking* as he stood there, protecting him with his own body from the number three hero.

Oh, what Izuku would give to know what was going through his mind at that moment. He figures it would be nothing good, but still.

“Midoriya!”

Izuku is shoved to the side, just barely missing the pole he was heading straight for. He stumbles, turning back to Aizawa with wide eyes, and—oh. Hawks... is gone?

How did he not hear him leave? He must’ve flown away, of course, so was Izuku just that out of it that he didn’t notice? It must be the drugs.

And if Hawks did leave just like that, does that mean he’s letting them off the hook? It’s almost too good to be true.

Aizawa takes him by the shoulder again and steers him back to the center of the sidewalk. The gesture reminds Izuku of the first time they met, when the boy almost walked right into another pole that night.

And that memory was so, so long ago that Izuku’s chest physically aches. So much has changed since then. He’s come so far, and yet it seems he’s also starting to go backwards.

Izuku wipes at his nose, and a bit of blood smears on his sleeve from a cut on his cheekbone. He still feels a little loopy and fuzzy, which are most likely aftereffects of the quirk, so he can’t really think properly.

There’s movement, and then Aizawa is reaching into his tactical belt and pulling out a bandage with some ointment on it. “Here,” he says simply, tucking his face back into his scarf.

And honestly, Izuku had forgotten about the cuts he’d gotten from tonight’s patrol. He never usually checks for injuries that aren’t major. Cuts and bruises will usually heal by themselves as long as they’re not too extreme, so he doesn’t see the point of it.

He didn’t exactly appreciate Hawks about to use that excuse to get closer to him. There’s no way the number three hero was willing to help him like that without something in return.

Izuku is so, *so* glad that Aizawa arrived just in time, just like he always does. Would he still be with Hawks right now otherwise?

The boy wipes off the dirt on his cheek and presses the bandage against the cut, wincing slightly at the sting.

Aizawa doesn’t speak even though Hawks has already left, and that’s

how Izuku *knows* he fucked up. He expected yelling, he expected *something,* because this is far worse than his hospital escape precisely because he directly disobeyed Aizawa. He wasn't supposed to leave the apartment at all, and while he technically knew he wasn't allowed to leave the hospital either that day, he wasn't specifically told that, as dumb as it sounds.

But this time? It's obvious that he did this knowing full well he was in the wrong. He wasn't planning on getting caught.

Is he waiting for Izuku to speak? Or does he just not care enough? He can't read his face.

Aizawa's phone rings, and he takes it out and immediately answers the call, muttering *it's Hizashi* under his breath. And those two words are all it takes for Izuku to crumble even more.

So he does know. Aizawa didn't just do this on his own. Fuck. What does the voice hero think of all this? As much as Izuku needs to know what Yamada is saying on the other end, he forces himself to tune out their conversation. He kind of doesn't *want* to listen.

He doesn't deserve to.

Izuku suddenly remembers how Aizawa had turned to him back at that warehouse place, his dark gaze boring into his own with such intensity that Izuku almost felt like *crying.* The sign language had taken him so much by surprise that he almost didn't register the motions at first.

'We're leaving. Don't talk to him and don't interact with him. Stay by me.'

It was the *don't interact* part that threw Izuku for a loop, and the boy had opened his mouth to somehow get Aizawa to understand that goddammit he *needs* to interact with him to get his medi—ahem, his stuff back, but then Aizawa was jerking his head sharply, hands shaking as they cut him off before he could even start.

'Not a good time to argue.'

Izuku has a feeling he was referring to more than just what was happening in that moment, and the more he thinks about it, the stronger the guilt becomes.

Maybe he *was* being childish. He very well could've died out there tonight because he didn't know what he was doing. His body and

quirks alike have changed a lot, so how could he have thought patrolling was a good idea?

He doesn't regret running. Despite how *bad* he feels right now, he would still choose that option every single time over if he had the chance to. It's just his actions leading up to now he would change slightly.

Perhaps he should've crashed Kacchan's place. He would probably be safe and warm next to his friend, sleeping, instead of being here.

But at the same time, how would Aizawa and Yamada have felt?

Aizawa is off the phone call now, so Izuku clears his throat softly, his hands playing with one of the dirty All Might slippers in his hoodie. It's a shame he practically ruined them just a few hours after stealing them. "How did you know I was gone?"

He can feel Aizawa's eyes on him now, as if expecting him to speak sooner or later, but Izuku doesn't look up. "Hizashi brought something for you when he came home. You didn't answer him either when he called you, so I got worried."

Oh. Yamada… brought him something? As in, he *thought* of Izuku enough to do something for him?

This makes Izuku feel like even *more* of an ass. He's just so ungrateful, isn't he? He's never been cared for quite like this, and yet he was oh so willing to throw that all away so he could what, patrol for a little bit without an actual costume or anything? To play the hero? Christ.

And Aizawa also said worried. He was… worried. About Izuku. For Izuku.

Why is it that he's only seeing this stuff now, *after* the fact? After he's done something stupid and already made a fool of himself?

Aizawa huffs softly, the hand squeezing his shoulder yet again. "You really couldn't wait another week, could you, Midoriya?"

It's not meant to be a hurtful jab. More of a tease than anything, but Izuku looks at the dirty ground anyway, eyes stinging. An annoyed Aizawa is something he's all too familiar with, both as Midoriya Izuku and as Rabbit. The boy has screwed up yet again, but this time around Aizawa has this certain look on his face that's never been there before. At least, not that Izuku's ever seen.

He doesn't look pleased, but he's also not quite disappointed. It looks almost like he's resigned—no, exhausted would be a better word.

It's because he has to deal with a dumb teen like you, that nasty voice says at the back of his mind, making Izuku wince. *He didn't ask for you to be dropped into his life, but now he's stuck with you all the same.*

Is that really true, though? It's easy to believe. It's easy to just look at the situation at hand and go *yeah, there's the source of the problem. It's been staring back at you in the mirror your entire life.*

But does that make it the truth? If Aizawa truly didn't care, if he truly didn't want him around, he wouldn't have bothered to look for him. He wouldn't have dared to square up to the *number three hero* just to protect him, putting not only his career but his life on the line in the process.

That has to count for something, right?

They pass by an open shop as they near the apartment complex, and Aizawa halts for a moment, turning to him. The glare of the amber light helps illuminate both of their features, and Aizawa takes out some medical wipes from his belt.

"Stay still," he orders, eyebrows furrowing in concentration as he starts to wipe away the grime and dirt on Izuku's face. Sometime on the way here, the boy had lost his makeshift mask, revealing the rest of his face. His teacher isn't being rough but he's not being particularly gentle either. The touch is so inherently Aizawa that Izuku finds himself glitching for a moment, unsure of what to do.

But then Izuku is reaching up to stop it, because as upset as he is he's *not* going to stand being treated like a helpless toddler who can't wipe his own face. Aizawa just swats his hand away, though, pressing a few wipes into the boy's palm.

"Your arms are just as bad. Clean them up separately. We don't want you catching something again."

Ah, so that's why he's doing this now. He doesn't want Izuku to get sick or get an infection. He honestly didn't realize how sloppy he was being during patrol. Now that he's looking back on it, though, he can tell that he was definitely being careless.

Getting slammed into some mud at the park while chasing a bag snatcher didn't help his mood either.

Izuku's face burns at the attention, at just how close Aizawa has gotten to study his face. He's right there, and Izuku *really* doesn't want to look him in the eye, so he focuses on scrubbing his arms.

He wants to apologize. He feels the *sorry* bubbling up in his throat, but somehow he doesn't know quite how to say it. Would Aizawa even accept it? What is it even for?

For running? For making him and Yamada worry? For overall being a general nuisance and drain of resources this past week?

He's just so tired, and he can't think. So maybe it's all in one. He wishes he actually had the courage to apologize to Aizawa.

"There, now you look less homeless," his teacher says, steering him forwards again after throwing the used medical wipes into a nearby trash can. Which probably isn't the safest thing to do, Izuku is sure, but he's too stuck on what Aizawa said to really care about the biological hazard the hero just created.

His first instinct is to say *but I thought I* was *homeless?* but the words die on his tongue before they can escape.

Is he homeless now? Can he even claim to be? He's been at the Aizawa-Yamada household for a week now, and the first time he gets away he's still allowing himself to be dragged back.

Because maybe he truly doesn't mind it so much.

The car is still out front in its designated parking spot, which has Izuku wincing and hesitating at the entrance to the apartment. He doesn't want to go in now that he knows Yamada will be waiting for him.

What if Yamada is *upset?* What if he hates—

Aizawa shoves him inside after opening the door, as if ripping it off quick, just like a bandaid.

And Izuku takes it back, he really does hate the underground bastard.

Yamada is sitting on the couch in the living room, and his eyes widen when he sees the boy stumbling in. The relieved grin that splits across his face is almost blinding, and in a split second there's suddenly a hand on Izuku's shoulder and another on his head. Green eyes roam over Izuku to check over his injuries briefly before settling back on his

face. It's like a blazing inferno is going on around those swirls, and yet it's not scary at all.

Izuku is aware that Yamada is probably saying something to him, but there's a ringing in his ears now that's hard to ignore. "Sorry," is the first thing he says to him. And he knows it's ironic that he'll apologize to Yamada and not Aizawa, but he'll have a crisis over that later. He didn't *mean* to upset Yamada.

"Oh, kiddo, don't be sorry for this." The voice hero's eyes linger on the bandage on his cheek. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Aizawa is putting his capture weapon up on its hook and pointedly not looking Izuku's way, so he can't rely on him to help explain. He just nods in response, not really knowing what to say. What *could* he even say?

Oh, yeah, I'm doing great. I almost took this girl's quirk because I just couldn't fucking help myself, and then I got drugged and almost potentially let the number three hero know my identity! Now Aizawa will probably have to owe him something for keeping quiet—if he even decides to keep quiet! So, yeah, I'm okay!

Everything is sort of a blur after that. Like he's detached from reality. It feels like he's floating through his life at the moment, unattached to the world. As if everything he sees is through someone else's eyes. Someone he doesn't know.

He faintly remembers being nudged to the guest room to put on clothes that *aren't disgusting, christ, kid, what did you roll in,* and then he's suddenly in the kitchen after storing his medicine and All Might slippers somewhere safe.

Aizawa is directing him to the food he heated up for him, and Izuku blinks. He hears them talking in the living room, probably about whatever show is on at this time of day, and he stops eavesdropping immediately. They deserve that much, at least.

Katsudon. Did Aizawa make this purposefully? Did he actually remember that stupid conversation they had all those months ago? The one where Izuku revealed that it was his favorite food?

Even Izuku forgot about that until now.

He eats with a different kind of shakiness, not caring that it's already a few hours old. It tastes delicious. It tastes like *comfort.*

And he doesn't think there's anything he can do to stop it when his eyes start stinging, his chest tightening in that way it does when he's either feeling nothing at all or everything at once. He feels like he's crying, but his eyes are dry and no tears drop, so what is this?

Is this normal? Is this even allowed for someone like him? He scrubs at his face with a fist, holding the last bite of fried pork in between his chopsticks as his hands decide not to work anymore.

"Kid?"

Aizawa is looking at him, and now so is Yamada. It looks like they're about to head to bed soon, and honestly they should've already been asleep. Izuku shouldn't have kept them up for something so trivial.

Yamada has this pained expression on his face, looking as if he's thinking of something difficult. *Don't be sorry for this,* he'd said. Why shouldn't Izuku be? He just needs one answer to that, that's all.

He knew it was wrong. He really did. He went out knowing that they wouldn't like it if they found out, and yet he did it anyway. Out of spite or anger or sadness or grief for what Izuku could've been, he doesn't know.

But Izuku is hit with sudden, blinding clarity. Yamada looks sad, so that could mean Aizawa is, too.

Izuku prides himself as someone with great self-control and an ability to hold his tongue when the situation calls for it, born out of necessity when he had to deal with his father's short temper. Now, though, he's not sure if it's the delirium from the drug quirk or the sudden pressing desperation to make the teachers in front of him *understand* that makes him talk, but either way he can't stop the words from tumbling out.

"It wasn't you!"

The two heroes blink at him from the living room, and Izuku looks away, embarrassed by the spotlight. The last bite on his plate suddenly looks a bit less appetizing.

He shuffles around, feeling small under their burning gazes, and okay, maybe this whole thing tonight was stupid.

"I didn't run because of—of you guys. I mean, I *did,* but it—it wasn't your fault. I just…" Izuku trails off, glaring at the ground as if it

wronged him somehow. His teachers wait patiently for him to continue. “I don’t know. I just needed to get out?”

Fuck. Now it’s starting to sound like he’s making a shitty excuse. Will they think he’s trying to shift the blame away from himself?

God, he’s just so tired right now. He wants AINA and Kacchan.

When Izuku looks back up, Yamada is suddenly in front of him. He doesn’t remember hearing him get up from the couch, but then again it’s not like he was listening for him.

That could be his real quirk: teleportation. Now wouldn’t that be a trip? Izuku would finally know why Yamada always feels so effortlessly comforting and familiar to him.

Gentle hands land on Izuku’s shoulders for the nth time today, and the boy stares up into sincere green eyes, heart thumping inside his chest.

“We’re not mad at you, kiddo. You know that, right? We were just worried.” Yamada crouches down so that he’s the one who’s looking up, and the change has Izuku’s mind crashing. “When I came home and saw you were gone, I thought somebody had taken you.”

Oh. *Oh.* Now he feels like shit. Izuku looks away, ears burning with newfound shame. He didn’t even think of it that way. He didn’t think they would *care* that much.

Is that why Aizawa was trembling so badly? He was scared of what could happen?

The voice hero shakes him gently to gain back his attention. “You shouldn’t have been put in a position where you felt like you had no choice but to run, so that part is on us, Midoriya, and I’m so, so sorry for making you feel that way.”

Izuku frowns and tries to cut in, because if *anything* it’s just Aizawa’s fault, if not his own, but the man shakes his head before he can throw the underground hero under the bus.

“You know what, kiddo? It’s getting late. You should finish up and head to bed, ‘kay? You must be exhausted.”

He is, but what difference does it make? Izuku hasn’t been punished yet. He’s barely even been *yelled* at, so what’s going on? Why isn’t there more fighting?

There are no blows or angry lectures, or even the threat of confinement. There's just… leftover katsudon and more care being given to him than he probably deserves right now.

Yamada brushes away a stray curl from Izuku's face, a concerned crease between his brows now. "Are you okay?"

He nods on instinct, now used to the blond hero asking him that after many other different situations. But instead of feeling repetitive or forced, the question feels just as sincere as it did the first time Yamada ever asked it.

As if he wants to know his answer every time.

"I'm okay," he says, because the hero still doesn't look convinced. Why it even *matters* what Izuku is feeling and thinking, he'll never know.

But he'll do anything at the moment to wipe that concerned frown off his teacher's face.

Aizawa walks over from the couch at the same time that Yamada straightens up, so now both men are back to towering over him. Izuku doesn't feel overwhelmed or anything, though. Not this time around.

He feels, weirdly enough, *safer* than he did before.

"Go to bed, Midoriya." Aizawa leans forward to pick some lint off Izuku's shirt. "I have to leave for the hospital in the morning, but before that we're going to have a chat, alright?"

A what? A chat? Okay, maybe Izuku spoke too soon. What the hell does that mean?

His first thought is *it's an interrogation,* but he pushes the idea aside just as quickly as it came. They would bring Tsukauchi over for that, and it doesn't seem like he's going to see the detective for a long while yet. It's safe to say that it's probably not an interrogation—an official one, at least.

And there's this small, tiny part of himself that refuses to believe they'd even do something like that now.

Yamada glares at his husband. "Don't make it sound so ominous, Shouta!" His gaze is soft when he turns back. "He means we're going to have a house meeting. You're not in trouble or anything, of course!

It's just to make sure we're all on the same page, and also to lay down some ground rules, yeah? Is that okay?"

Is that okay?

Izuku nods again even though he's still reeling. Why is he asking if Izuku's okay with it? This isn't his house. He shouldn't have any say in the matter, right?

And Yamada mentioned ground rules. Rules are good, he thinks, but they're also constricting. They're good to have in mind so he at least knows where the breaking point is, but that's about it. He guesses he can't have a definite opinion on them until he knows what they are—

His thoughts come to a screeching halt when Yamada gently pulls him closer. Because this… this is a *hug.* Yeah. Definitely a hug.

A pair of arms wrap around his shoulders and tug him in, but they're loose enough so that Izuku could break away easily if he wanted to.

But why would he even want to?

Yamada smells faintly like strawberries and vanilla, probably due to one of his Present Mic perfumes, and it has to be the most welcoming scent that could ever exist.

That, coupled with just how *comforted* he feels right now, makes this easily the best hug he's ever experienced. Not like he has a lot to compare it with, but still.

Izuku doesn't know what to do, so he just stands there, his arms limp at his sides. After a few moments, he hesitantly reaches up to hug Yamada back, but the hero is already pulling away. "I'm glad you're alright, kiddo," he says, ruffling his hair one last time before taking the empty plate and heading for the dishwasher.

It's only when Aizawa pokes him in the forehead a whole thirty seconds later that Izuku realizes he's still standing there, trying to process what just happened.

"Bed," the hero reminds, shooing him with a hand. "Get some rest. You need to sleep off the rest of those drugs."

Izuku is already almost to the guest room, feeling a little floaty, when he hears a crash, followed by Yamada screeching *WHAT DRUGS?*

He walks faster, not wanting to be the one to explain *that* specific part of his midnight adventure to the man.

Aizawa will have to take one for the team, and honestly? That's what he gets.

But as he goes back to the room and lays down, with Missy staking claim to his desk as per usual, Izuku finds that he feels better, actually. He wasn't planning on getting caught, of course, and he wasn't trying to worry them—but life just has a weird way of kicking you in the ass. It's funny how things turn out sometimes.

Stain's face pops up in his mind momentarily, but it feels easy to push the image away this time. Just for a little while.

He was expecting many different ways that this night could end, but this surely wasn't one of them. It's not exactly the worst outcome, he thinks. Far from it.

In fact, it's probably one of the best ones.

Chapter End Notes

> aizawa in chapter 2, pointing at izuku: who is this sassy, lost child??
> aizawa now, ready to fight the number three hero and even god: don't ever talk to me or my son ever again
>
> listen to this song on yt to get the vibe for this chapter :)
> l

perfectly wrong

Chapter Notes

(warnings: implied child abuse, manipulation, slight gore, and torture)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's blood on the walls.

It seeps through the cracks in the floor and stains the area around Izuku red.

He doesn't remember getting here. He doesn't remember where *here* even is. This place feels familiar, and yet Izuku can't recall it in his memories. He doubts it's even real.

The air is heavy with something he can't quite identify. It feels a little bit like fear. Like regret. But at the same time, neither of those fit quite right.

Izuku can feel his heart start to squeeze painfully inside his chest. Horror settles over his skin and sends tingles of dread down his spine, and when he tries to move from his spot he finds that he can't. His legs are rooted in place.

He's suffocating, he's sure of it. And yet even as he realizes this, his body remains perfectly still for another few moments, as if on autopilot. As if he's programmed.

This room is important. The copper building on his tongue is proof of that.

All of this feels like *change.* Like something Izuku ought to remember.

And what a strange feeling that is.

When he finally builds up the strength to twist his head around, he sees a guy strapped to a chair a couple yards to his left. He doesn't know how he didn't notice him before, or how he at least didn't sense him there, but then his mind chooses to focus on the hand-shaped burns on the man's arms and the dullness to his eyes, and he thinks *oh.*

So this is what this is. Things are starting to feel familiar now, almost hauntingly so.

"Why are we hurting them?"

The voice comes from out of nowhere, making Izuku whip around to try and see where the owner of it could possibly be. The feeling in his limbs is slowly starting to come back to him, but no amount of spinning in place allows him to see whoever is there. If there even *is* someone there. There's nothing but four bloody walls enclosing him in —four bloody walls cutting off any potential plans for escape.

And then there's the guy in the chair.

The more Izuku looks at him, the more he doesn't want to be here. At all. He wants *out.*

"Did they do something wrong?"

Izuku's blood turns to ice. He *knows* who those words belong to now. Kacchan used to tease him about his squeaky voice all the time back when they were both little. Well, it was more like *insulting* then, not so much teasing, but still.

No. It can't be. Is that…?

"Of course not, Izuku."

He both expected and prepared for it the moment he recognized the setup of the room, and yet Izuku can't help the full-body flinch when he hears the new voice all the same.

His hands start to shake on their own accord, and he nearly trips over himself in his franticness to just make *sure* he's not here. He can't see him, but that's how it was back then. It doesn't matter if you can't see him, he's *there.* He's always there.

Izuku's back hits the wall, blood staining his shirt. He can't use his quirks. None of them are coming to him, so does that mean it's over? Did it really happen this easily? Where even *was* Izuku before this? How did he get here?

Where's Yamada and Aizawa? Or Missy? Or, fuck, *All Might—?*

The guy strapped to the chair twitches, and Izuku's breathing picks up. He thought he was dead or something, but alas, the corpse is now

sitting up straight in the center of the room, the restraints cutting against his skin. A cracked mouth opens to form a soundless wail, and Izuku shivers.

"If they're not villains, why do we make them cry?"

The man jerks, trying to escape, only to tense up at the electricity that pulses through him a moment later. The process looks almost cyclic. As if he's used to this by now but just can't let himself admit defeat. Not now and not ever.

It looks like a hero who will die fighting, Izuku realizes. It makes him want to throw up.

"A little pain is necessary for the world to advance, my dear boy." It comes out as a low rumble, and Izuku thinks it would almost sound comforting coming from anyone else. *"Strangers hurt each other meaninglessly in war every day. This is no different."*

War.

The blood starts to flow faster down the walls and up through the ground. It's all going *towards* Izuku. It's all around him, soaking his legs and feet and flooding the room.

When Izuku looks back up, the man and the chair are gone, replaced by a pile of limp figures. *Bodies,* his mind corrects. *These are actual corpses this time.*

He can tell they're dead even with how far away he is. His mind now allows him to see them as if they're under a microscope, and he can see how abnormally still they are under the faint light from above.

Oh, god.

No, no. This isn't right. This didn't happen. What is this? A nightmare? Some sick joke or something? Where are the cameras?

The panic is settling in deep, coursing through his veins and echoing in his bones.

More corpses flicker into view, appearing from the depths of the growing blood pool. He sees familiar faces. Familiar costumes and symbols and colors. These are his *friends.* His friends are *dead.*

The bodies continue to pile up, towering over him, and Izuku slides

down the wall, hands over his mouth. What little light left is snuffed out, and glowing eyes peek at him through inky darkness from all corners of the room.

“This is… war?”

The blood is up to his chest now, but Izuku pays it no mind. He can’t. Not with how *fast* his mind is going. His insides have been hollowed out and replaced with horror and unadulterated *fear*.

Everything feels scary, wrong, and yet right after all. Nothing's making sense. His vision is blurring near the edges and he can’t even figure out *why*.

It’s when Izuku sees a flash of blond and black hair that he jolts into action, body moving before he can stop himself. His hand reaches out, a desperate cry tearing its way out of his throat, but the blood swallows him whole before he can make it.

The near suffocating heat that follows is more comforting than it probably should be.

When Izuku wakes, he can still taste the iron in his mouth. His entire body is trembling, and he nearly falls off the bed in his haste to make it to the trash can, throat burning. The amount of blood he coughs up this time is a lot more than he ever has before, and the realization does nothing to curb his rising anxiety.

It was just a dream, he reminds himself, gripping the edges of the waste basket. A dream. Nothing more.

He’s still slumped on the floor, not having the energy to move just yet. He can’t.

His hands are still stained red no matter how many times he wipes them on the bed sheets, and he can see more blood demanding his attention out of the corner of his vision, sliding down the bare walls of this room. He knows it’s not real, obviously, but he can’t help it. He can’t help but feel so fucking helpless and *angry* at how unfair his brain is, at how it’s making him go through this again.

It’s getting tiring.

Izuku looks up and sees the first rays of sunlight filtering in through the window above him. It must still be early, which means he only managed to sleep for a few hours.

What a great way to start the morning, huh?

It takes a few more minutes for Izuku to calm down, and in that time he throws away more bloodied tissues and falls back onto the bed—not before retrieving his bottle of pills, though. He's definitely going to need some of them now, as he can feel the tingling in his throat start back up again.

His body is itching worse than before, like the blood is still there, settling over his skin and caking underneath his nails. Like it'll never go away.

He can barely even remember the details of the dream, and he hates it. It couldn't have been that bad, right? If he forgot about most of it?

Izuku can't remember it all, but he can remember how *vivid* it felt. How *scary*.

Is this because of what happened last night? Perhaps the nightmare was an aftereffect of that girl's quirk. She can make you feel drunk, so it's entirely possible that his mind could have also been tampered with, consequently pushing him over the edge.

He really hopes that's the reason. If this is going to become a nightly thing again, he doesn't know what he'll do.

His thoughts go back to the medicine in his hands. What really bothers Izuku is that last night he was too out of it to fully question why Hawks ended up giving the pills back to him, as from a legal standpoint he should *not* have done so. Hawks even took extra care to hand over the bottle discreetly so he wouldn't alert Aizawa. It seems almost as if he knew Izuku had to keep that specific thing hidden from him, as if he knew that Izuku *needed* that medicine.

For why else would the number three hero decide to give potentially dangerous pills back to a wanted vigilante? He could've easily kept it—hell, it could've been a trade-off since he wasn't capturing Rabbit. Like a form of payment.

What Hawks *did* do, however, was keep the white paper bag that most prescription medicine is kept in.

And Izuku hates the coil of fear that springs up inside him at that. It has to have been a coincidence, he thinks, because what reason would he have to keep the bag? Izuku can't remember if his name was on it or not. He knows the name of the actual medicine must be on it, of

course, but Hawks might not get anywhere with that piece of info since Izuku's doctor worked on making it himself.

These pills were made for Izuku. They're one of a kind. It's not like Hawks can just look up the name on the web and find an answer. No, he would have to go *looking* for one.

Which is fucking *bad.* Hawks wouldn't have taken something like that for no reason. Izuku knows he wouldn't have just thrown it away after flying off. No, it's more than likely that he kept it, that he *still has it.*

A dangerous train of thought that is, huh? Izuku briefly wonders if Hawks accepts bribes, being the type of hero he is. Maybe a bucket of chicken would suffice, and also a promise to do whatever dirty work he wants.

Izuku wouldn't mind having to work alongside Hawks in secret for whatever reason, though he doubts it would ever be that easy.

Nothing is ever that easy with adults.

Missy hops onto the bed and face-plants into his stomach, rubbing her hair all over him as she stretches.

"Morning to you, too," he greets, thankful for the distraction. The tuxedo cat just playfully bites into his hand when he tries to pet her and then flops the rest of the way down, tail whacking his face.

She's getting a little heavier, Izuku realizes. While he was feeding her and taking care of her as best he could before the explosion, Missy still could've put on a few pounds if the situation let her. But here, where the food is stable and on time, and also probably much healthier than the food Izuku was feeding her, she's been getting bigger.

It's relieving to know that she's safe and content here. It hasn't gone unnoticed to Izuku how she tends to follow Aizawa around and con him into giving her treats. She seems to like the hero a lot, which only makes Izuku a *little* jealous.

The last thing he needs is for Aizawa and Yamada to turn her against him. She was Izuku's cat *first.*

"I take it you didn't snitch after I left?" He teases.

She meows in response, ears flattening, and at the same time there's a couple of knocks at the door.

Izuku yelps, not having felt anyone approaching. He quickly sits back up, accidentally throwing Missy off of him in the process, and shoves the bottle of pills under a pillow. “Uh, yeah! Come in!”

He still doesn’t know why his teachers bother knocking, but he can’t say he doesn’t appreciate it. Privacy is nice, if not unexpected.

Yamada pokes his head through the door, smiling widely. “Mornin’, kiddo! Sho’s making some breakfast before he has to go, so I hope you’re up for some eggs!”

Breakfast? Now that Izuku is thinking about it, he smells something delicious coming from the kitchen, along with—is that *bacon?*

Oh, fucking hell, Yamada should’ve *led* with that.

Izuku scrambles off the bed, only for his foot to get caught in the sheets and send him tumbling to the floor. He squawks when the comforter comes with him, tangling him up even further as he tries to wriggle out of the trap.

It’s only now that he realizes how sore his limbs are. He didn’t even stretch or exercise before going out on patrol last night, and all of the stuff he did certainly wouldn’t help with his injuries, he thinks.

Yeah. Definitely not his best idea.

“Dammit!” His face turns beet red when he hears Yamada double over in laughter, and he struggles even more. “I’m coming! Just—just give me a minute, I swear—!”

A weight settles on his back, and Izuku cranes his neck to glare at the smug-looking cat sitting on him, tail curled politely around white and black paws.

You snake, Missy, he thinks. *There’s a reason I like Sushi better!*

Yamada is still laughing at the sight of Izuku writhing around on the floor like a dying fish. The boy is just about to call upon one of his quirks to somehow help him out when Yamada takes pity on him.

He pads forward, galaxy slippers sliding across fluffy carpet, and Izuku immediately stops struggling in anticipation. The man reaches down and tugs sharply at a corner of the comforter, which sends Izuku rolling off to the side when the blanket unfurls from around him.

Successfully freed from his prison, Izuku shoots back up to his feet, stumbling a little with his ears burning as he tries to regain his balance. Okay, so *maybe* it could've been that easy to escape that. His panic just made him think and act a little slower than usual, that's all.

"Good m^{orni}n^{g}!" Izuku says, trying and failing to maintain any last semblance of dignity. He decides to ignore how painfully his voice just cracked, as that is the *second* fucking time, instead choosing to head for the doorway. "Did—did you sleep okay?"

It was already morning by the time everything ended, but still.

Yamada makes a noise that's somewhere between a laugh and an affirmative hum, and he places a light hand on Izuku's head when the boy walks past him. "I did, thank you. I'm hoping you got some hours in, too?"

Oh, Izuku kind of wants to snort at that, but he holds it in and instead gives a sharp nod. He follows Yamada out into the living room, pointedly ignoring the mewling Missy doing figure-eights around his legs.

She knows what she did.

The apartment feels nice somehow, he notices. Well, it always feels nice, but this time it all feels a little more prominent. He walks further into the living room, and it's like a nice blanket being draped over him on a chilly night. He stands around by the dining table, just taking a moment to breathe in the smell of bacon and pancakes. There's orange juice on the table, along with the last of Izuku's medicine—his *actual* medicine. The kind that the doctors at the hospital are making him take.

Whether or not he should keep taking them now that he's on another, *unlicensed* drug is the question, but he figures he'll just have to wait and find out what happens when the different drugs mix.

Aizawa is in the kitchen by the stove, already looking fully dressed and ready to go, and when he catches sight of Izuku's still-flushed face he furrows his brows in suspicion. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing!" Izuku says quickly.

The underground hero looks even *more* suspicious at that. He glances at Yamada, who raises his hands with a shit-eating grin. "You heard the listener. Nothing to concern yourself over, Sho. You just keep

flipping those pancakes."

Aizawa glowers at him. "I'm going to burn yours."

Izuku giggles at the indignant shriek that Yamada lets out in reply, and after a moment's hesitation he lets his feet carry himself into the kitchen. There's a plate full of bacon off to the side of the stove, along with some sunny-side up eggs.

They look perfect, almost professionally done. Izuku thinks faintly that Gordon Ramsay would be absolutely delighted if he saw them. Hell, Ms. Hanako would probably give Aizawa a free basket of her pastries and goods because *finally, someone who actually knows how to make decent eggs around here. My hope for the younger generations has been restored.*

Izuku walks a little closer, careful not to get in Aizawa's way. The hero is pouring batter onto a griddle on the stovetop, and the boy's eyes widen a little.

Pancakes. He's making pancakes. Izuku didn't even know he knew *how* to make pancakes. He knows Aizawa can cook, obviously, the man just doesn't ever feel like doing so. But pancakes? Has he ever told Izuku he could make that?

It's kind of funny, honestly. Hardass, compulsive expeller Aizawa Shouta makes chocolate chip pancakes in his free time. And damn good ones at that; they smell heavenly, and the ones he's already made are sitting off to the side, the slightest crispiness to the edges.

Just how Kurogiri would make them, his mind says suddenly, and Izuku beats that voice down with a stick, annoyed now at the reminder. Now is not the time to go back down that road.

He looks up, noting the dark circles under Aizawa's eyes. Well, dark*er*. The man looks like he hasn't slept at all in at least a week, which makes a stab of guilt hit Izuku in the chest.

He blinks, and all he sees is Aizawa holding him back behind him, Aizawa *shielding* him from a piercing golden gaze.

Izuku steps back a little to study his face. Is he mad? He knows Yamada said that neither of them are upset about what he did, but it's been a few hours since then. Things change. They always do.

But Aizawa is usually blunt. Izuku has learned to count on that. The

man doesn't hesitate in saying his opinions when the situation calls for it, so the fact that he's being pretty silent is unnerving.

It's almost scary.

Izuku moves away even further, about to head for the living room, but then Aizawa is stepping back and handing him the spatula. "Flip them when they're done," he says simply, turning around to get some utensils from the drawer.

And Izuku hesitates. Pancakes. He hasn't made these in a long, long time, but he knows how easy it is to burn them. It's easy to get it right, too, though, which is why it's pathetic that he's panicking.

His mind is blank. He thinks it's because of the dream he had and yet he can't be so sure.

Shit, he should *know* when to flip them. They're just pancakes. It should be stupidly easy. Just… flip them when they start to smoke, right? Or whenever they start to not stick to the pan? But these look to have a ton of chocolate chips in them, and Izuku knows that too many chocolate chips can affect the heat distribution and either cook the pancakes too fast or too slow.

If he flips one like he would a plain pancake, it might not be done all the way inside, or worse, he'll *burn* it.

He should ask for confirmation. He knows Aizawa won't ridicule him for it. The man only gets upset when someone gets hurt or fails at something because they *didn't* ask for help.

But still. Izuku is getting stuck on something that even a five year old could grasp. That's embarrassing.

"Have you ever made pancakes before?" Yamada asks, suddenly right beside him. The movement makes Izuku flinch despite himself.

Try again.

"I have," he says a little quietly, stepping away and handing Yamada the spatula. "But it's been a while since the last time I did it. I think I just, uh, forgot how?" Izuku rubs the back of his neck at the last two words, suddenly embarrassed.

But Yamada's face just lights up, and when he smiles his eyes crinkle near the edges. "Ooh, so all the more reason to teach you, yeah?" He

moves so he's standing right beside him, his arm brushing Izuku's shoulder. "Some pancake recipes differ, but I'll show you how Sho and I make them!"

The voice hero points with the spatula to a cookbook sitting on the countertop across from them, and he starts to recite the ingredients and steps aloud. He then directs Izuku to continue making more batter as he flips the pancakes already on the stove, adding even more chocolate chips.

He spreads them out to look like cat ears on the pancakes, and Izuku smiles at the display. Yamada does it so fluidly that Izuku is sure he's done this before, probably for Aizawa.

It's heartwarming to see. Almost sickeningly sweet.

"Once you've got that done, you just pour the batter onto the griddle until you get the size you want!" Yamada moves to the side to allow Izuku more space to pour. "Just make sure not to make them too big, though, since bigger pancakes are harder to flip."

And they won't cook correctly on the inside, Izuku thinks, the memories suddenly flooding back to him.

He can hear Aizawa unloading the dishwasher somewhere behind him, and Izuku frowns to himself. That's a job that Izuku could be doing. It's mundane and boring, so he *should* be doing that instead of Aizawa.

Yamada nudges his shoulder to get his attention. "You know one side is close to done when it starts to bubble on the edges. You'll spot little holes pop up through the batter, see?"

He hands Izuku the spatula and encourages him to flip them this time while he takes over the batter bowl. Izuku does so with great care, eyebrows pinched. *This is simple, but I'm panicking. Why am I still panicking?*

Yamada starts to once again add an ungodly amount of chocolate chips and blueberries to the last of the mix, and the action is so inherently *Present Mic* that it's enough to bring Izuku out of his stupor immediately.

Holy shit. These pancakes are about to be so damn good.

"The eggs are getting cold, you know," Aizawa complains, finishing up

with the dishwasher and setting three plates out. Coffee is now brewing in the machine next to the toaster, and Izuku stops himself from asking for some.

Huh. It's almost like Aizawa is trying to tell them to hurry up without actually *telling* them to hurry up.

Yamada just sticks his tongue out before turning back to Izuku in a low whisper, suddenly switching to English. *"You see, we gotta be careful with this here species, since the underground hero can pose a threat to just about anyone on Saturday mornings."* Yamada narrows his eyes at Aizawa and studies him as a scientist would. *"Especially when he hasn't had his coffee yet."*

Izuku giggles, stacking the last of the pancakes on top of the others and setting them on the dining table. He hears Aizawa complain about how *you know I'm not fluent in English, 'Zashi, come on,* which only makes Izuku cackle harder.

All four cats are eating breakfast now, and it doesn't take long before the three of them are seated at the table. Yamada sits at one of the head spots this time, and Izuku sits in the seat closest to him with Aizawa straight across on the other side.

The eggs aren't actually cold, it turns out. They're still relatively warm, and Izuku just *can't eat fast enough.* His little excursion last night has left him tired, sore, and *starved.*

That last part is probably because Izuku wasn't able to finish his KFC before being drugged—which he's never going to forget about, by the way. He's forever going to hold resentment for the two criminals who got in the way of his chicken.

He swings his legs back and forth out of nerves, scarfing down the pancakes and bacon on his plate. They *did* end up making a ton of pancakes, which is weird. Izuku is the only one here who has to eat more than the average person, but even still, it's not like Izuku has been doing that lately. Hell, he's *never* done that.

But since the food is there… since Aizawa and Yamada look like they're almost done anyway… it wouldn't hurt to take more, right? Just so it won't get wasted?

As per usual, Yamada is the one leading the conversation this morning. Izuku excitedly talks with him between mouthfuls, and Aizawa buts in when he's not downing his two mugs of coffee.

Coffee that Izuku still wants and will one day work up the courage to ask him for. He practically lives off coffee, hot or cold, so not having it for like a week now feels like some form of punishment from above.

Or down below.

Neither of them say anything about last night. In fact, it's almost like they're avoiding the subject altogether for the time being. Now, Izuku should probably be more happy about that than he is. He's just scared. Because if they don't say anything about it, he won't know how they feel, and he won't know what will come next.

It's the unknown of it all that terrifies him.

Aizawa is going to the hospital after breakfast to go see Ingenium, which reminds Izuku that both of his teachers are friends with the other hero. Yamada went to see him last night, which is why he was presumably late coming home.

He hopes Iida and the rest of his family are okay. Izuku hasn't been a good friend at all to him—to anyone in 1-A, actually. He needs to be better. *Much* better.

When breakfast is finished and Izuku is taking his dishes back to the kitchen, he realizes that things feel sharper than they did last night. Like there's some sort of film over everything that's turning up the contrast and brightness of everything.

It's weird, but not quite unwelcome.

He can already tell that the pills are working. They must be the cause of what's happening, he thinks. His ears are sensitive; he can hear the hustle and bustle of the city outside, he can hear Yamada's phone vibrate from halfway across the apartment, and he can hear the low conversation the two heroes are having together through the kitchen wall.

Izuku could probably listen in if he wanted to, he could probably pick out every word, but he restrains himself. *They give me privacy, even when I don't deserve it, so it's only fair.*

There's a heavy weight in his chest, almost like there's a brick just hanging out inside there, scraping dangerously against his ribcage. He reaches up with a hand and presses at the spot, the uncomfortable feeling easing up a little.

His hands and fingers are trembling. They've been doing that for a while, he thinks. They haven't stopped doing that since… since the explosion, just about. He's just been trying to ignore it this whole time, because if he doesn't think about it or acknowledge it, eventually it should get easier to deal with, right?

Some days are worse than others. He really hopes that's the case today.

Izuku finishes putting everything in the sink and pauses, eyeing the mixing bowl that still has some leftover batter stuck to the sides. He dips a finger in to taste it, not able to resist the urge, and nearly jumps out of his skin when Aizawa walks up behind him.

"You're going to get salmonella," the man says, wrinkling his nose and turning on the tap to wash his hands.

Izuku shakes his head. "I'm immune to salmon vanilla, actually."

The sudden snort he gets in reply has Izuku beaming, his chest getting just a little lighter at the sound. *Victory.*

"Sure, kid, whatever you say." He nudges him with a hand. "Don't worry about the dishes. Just get to the table so we can talk."

The smile slips off Izuku's face instantly, and the boy stays rooted to the spot, watching Aizawa head back to the dining room. Talk. So they can *talk.*

Oh. Izuku had forgotten that they wanted to have a little chat with him before Aizawa left. What is this about again? Ground rules? This is because of what happened last night.

The mere thought of it has Izuku's arms stiffening at his sides. *It's not an interrogation. Quit it. You knew this was coming.*

When he comes back to himself, he sees that Yamada is already back at the table. But now he's in Aizawa's spot, and the underground hero is walking past to sit in the chair right across from him.

Which leaves the head of the table open, the chair having not been pushed in yet. The two men are facing a little ways that way, looking expectant. They want him to take that spot so they can both look at him properly, it seems.

But Izuku doesn't want to. *Why* would he be at the head of the table?

It's obvious that this was deliberate on their part, and he doesn't like it one bit.

Is this a test? He doesn't think so, as that would be cruel. But at the same time, you never know.

A tail brushes against Izuku's leg, and the boy takes the chance to bend down and pick Meatball up, cradling the cat like a baby to avoid meeting any of the adults' gazes. He ignores the space between the both of them and instead chooses to sit beside Yamada, blood roaring in his ears.

The pause only feels long because he's focusing on it, he tells himself. This is fine. This is okay. They won't get upset at him for going off-script.

It's Yamada who starts first, his voice patient and so, so kind that Izuku finds himself clinging to the words to help himself calm down. He's sure the blond must've been saying something to him before this, probably when he was walking over, but Izuku was too busy trying not to pass out to hear it.

"I just want to preface this by repeating that last night wasn't your fault at all, kiddo," Yamada says, trying and failing to get Izuku to look at him. The boy just keeps petting Meatball, deathly quiet. "That was due to lack of communication on our part. We kept some secrets from you and made you feel left out of the loop, yeah? So it's only fitting you felt the need to leave for a bit."

Izuku doesn't miss the word choice. *We* kept secrets. *We* made you feel left out. This means Yamada *did* know about how the criminals were killed during the explosion, at least in some way or another. But Izuku doesn't feel as upset about it as he thought he would be. It's easier now that he already knows about it—he only freaked out on Aizawa because the news had been *shocking* then.

The news of *Stain* had been shocking.

And though he's not alright with it, Izuku can see some of the reasons behind the men's actions. They weren't doing it to hurt him, no. Far from it.

To protect him, maybe. To shield him from having to deal with that clusterfuck. It's annoying that they thought doing that was necessary, though, because that just makes everything harder. Much harder.

Izuku doesn't need someone to protect him. The truth is the truth. You can't run or hide from it forever.

It always gets you in the end.

Yamada continues his speech, giving Izuku a small, half-smile. "And without that communication, I think we made you feel like you couldn't trust us, and that *we* didn't trust *you.* I'm hoping we can change that today, as that isn't healthy for any of us, you know?"

There are four cracks in the table. Izuku focuses on them as he strokes Meatball, wondering if they're just products of age or of something else. How many more would it take for the table to break?

Aizawa nods, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. "Trust works both ways," he says slowly.

And isn't this weird? Izuku never thought he'd be in a situation like this—having a talk about *trust* with his two teachers, in *their* apartment, with *their* cats.

He's been here for a week, and yet he still can't get over it.

The boy swallows back the lump in his throat. He knows Aizawa's comment wasn't meant like that, but he can't help the small bit of guilt that blooms inside him because of it. "Yeah," he whispers. "It does."

"Your health and safety is important, Midoriya, which is why Shouta and I have come up with a few rules that we could maybe implement around the apartment? It's more of a list of general house rules that we can *all* try our best to follow, since it wouldn't be very fair to just direct them all at you, yeah?"

Izuku blinks as Pickles hops into his lap and jostles Meatball in the process of begging for pets.

It's not supposed to be fair, though?

The blond pulls out a sheet of paper, smoothing down the creases before placing it on the table for Izuku to see.

"I wrote most of them down so it would be easier to talk through with all of us here, and I think it would be a good idea if we put this on the fridge after we're done, just so we can all see it! Is that okay?"

His voice gets higher near the end, signaling a direct question, and Izuku raises his head to look at Aizawa for his input. The hero merely shrugs and says nothing, leaving the boy on his own.

Why am I the only one giving input if it's not supposed to be directed at just me?

"Kiddo?"

Izuku shifts in the chair, biting the inside of his cheek hard enough to make it bleed. "Uh, yeah, that's fine."

It's just a paper, right? While its presence will probably annoy Izuku every time he has to go into the kitchen, there's not much harm it can do. He'll live. It won't be hard to ignore it.

At least in theory.

The first rule is simple, and it's not entirely unexpected. The topic of communication is probably brought up in every household, so Izuku had sort of mentally prepared for this one the moment he sat down. Yamada speaks every word like it's the most important thing in the world, like it matters beyond what one would normally expect, and the fact has something heavy lodging in Izuku's throat.

"Of course it's okay to have secrets," Yamada says, starting off slow. "Everyone has secrets, even adults! But things get a little tricky when we don't know about something that can potentially put you in harm's way or affect your health. Your well-being is still our priority, so I think it's important that we try to maintain that level of communication here, yeah? That goes for all of us."

That's not specific. I can work around that if I really need to, as it really depends on what you count as potentially harmful.

It's not like Izuku will actively be looking for a way to break the rule, it's just that it's easier to set these boundaries inside his head, too. It's easier to remember and follow that way.

The points that follow are... interesting, to say the least. Izuku has to fight back a snort at the second rule: *be kind to yourself!*

He's not sure why that one was important enough to warrant its own number, but he guesses it's fine. Yamada explains what exactly this entails, and the frown on Izuku's face gradually gets deeper.

What the fuck does *treat yourself like you're your only friend* even mean? And again, *why* is this important?

He doesn't voice these opinions out loud, though. He just nods along and hums when an answer is needed.

The third rule is about lying, something that Izuku is very familiar with, both in terms of doing and spotting.

Aizawa is the one who explains this one, but all he says is *you can lie about whatever you want as long as it's not important, just don't get caught.*

Izuku finds this quite funny, actually, but Yamada evidently does not. The voice hero glares at his husband and kicks him under the table, turning back to Izuku to recapitulate what the point really means.

"This one goes off rule number one, listener. As I've said, it's not strange for people to lie sometimes, and it's especially not abnormal for teenagers to lie. It would be unfair of us to expect you to be completely truthful all the time, especially since we ourselves weren't always truthful when we were your age."

Aizawa mutters something suspiciously like *speak for yourself, 'Zashi, I was an angel,* which earns him another kick to the shins.

Izuku hides his laugh with a cough into his palm. *Did we switch personalities or something?*

"So just please try not to lie about anything that has to do with your safety, kiddo!" Yamada continues as if the interruption never happened.

The boy thinks faintly that this one could've been merged with the first one, but it's too late now, for they're already onto the next rule.

Now *this* one has Izuku truly coughing into his hand: *No drug or alcohol use, both inside the house and out.*

Oh. Izuku truly couldn't be more sorry if he tried. Whoops.

Apparently there's not usually alcohol kept in the apartment for a variety of reasons, and Yamada said they'd like to keep it that way, especially since Izuku isn't even old enough to drink anyway.

Not that that's ever stopped him before.

Izuku keeps his gaze on the table, his knee starting to bounce up and down again. He doesn't miss the pointed look the voice hero gives to Aizawa, almost like he's reminding the other of something.

It doesn't seem like it's a good thing.

Everything that comes next follows the script Izuku had planned out in his head. The other rules are all clear, blunt, and typical for most households, and most of them have a little wriggle room for Izuku to work with.

Which is always good. Control is one of the things he *needs,* no matter how small.

When Yamada talks about the *no yelling or arguing in the house* rule, Aizawa and Izuku make the same face. They both obviously don't think that's going to last long.

The last point on the paper isn't exactly a rule, but Yamada goes over it anyway, a crease forming between his brows as he faces Izuku fully, his voice taking on a more solemn tone.

"And about last night, kiddo. We just ask that you don't disappear like that again, okay? You really worried us there." The blond laughs softly, though it's not because something's funny. "If you feel like you have to do that again, or that you need to get away from something, please come to one of us. We'll do everything we can to help you, I promise."

I promise?

Izuku scratches at the scar on his jaw, cheeks turning dark at the reminder of how he ran away just a few hours prior to this. "Okay," he mutters before he can even process what he's doing. "I won't disappear again, I promise."

Yamada and Aizawa both blink in surprised relief at him, and Izuku is left wondering what the *hell* compelled him to even say that. He never makes promises! He doesn't make them precisely because he knows there's a high chance he'll break them! Fuck! What is *wrong* with him today?

It's Aizawa who breaks the silence, his gruff voice dragging Izuku out from his muddled thoughts and mind. The teacher's eyes flash in the light, and he sighs. "I just want to say that things will change here very soon, kid. I apologize for keeping you cooped up in here for a

week, and also for not doing my best to keep you updated on what was happening out there. Like Hizashi said, I'm hoping we can try this out and see how it goes. That's all we can do now; try."

The last part isn't phrased like a question, but the boy shrugs as a way of acknowledgement anyway.

Yamada must see the look on his face, because he rests a light hand on his arm. "Hey, don't stress about it. These are things we can work on together, yeah? All of us."

Izuku glances away. "Even the cats?" He asks, and Yamada laughs a little.

"Yeah, listener, even the cats." For the second time, Yamada's eyes flick over pointedly to Aizawa, who looks to be thinking of something unpleasant before seemingly resigning to his fate.

He hunches forward in an attempt to not look so intimidating, but to Izuku that action somehow just has the opposite effect. Aizawa clears his throat before fixing the boy with a stare. "Hizashi and I also wanted to talk to you about a couple other things."

"It's about your health," Yamada adds, and it's the way he says it that tells Izuku that he's not going to like the upcoming discussion.

Shit. Health? Did Recovery Girl tell them about my blood or something? Or did she snitch about something else?

He doesn't want to explain the issue of his blood to the two of them. Sure, he could just spew the same lie he told the healer about the condition being painless and not a cause for concern, but doing so directly after a conversation about lying and trust?

It would make Izuku feel like one big *asshole.* Like a cheater.

The boy pushes down the bile creeping up his throat and nods, knee starting to bounce up and down again. He needs this discussion to be over soon.

Aizawa folds his arms and rests them on the table. "Monday marks your first day back at school. When we get to UA you're to head straight for the nurse's office so Chiyo can give you a checkup and take a look at how the healing's going. This is just a precaution so we can figure out if things have worsened for you or not."

“Wait, I’m going to school?” he echoes, frowning. He should probably pay more attention to the other details Aizawa gave, but at the moment he can’t think past the first part.

Logically, sending Izuku back to school would be an obvious course of action, especially since there’s nothing wrong with the boy. There never *was* anything wrong with him—at least, nothing that the explosions caused. But despite the rationality of it, Izuku still finds himself surprised by the notion of being sent back to a classroom, as it almost feels as if they’re acting like nothing ever happened, like they’re just forgetting that his secret identity was revealed.

He still isn't past the illegality of that part.

“Yep!” Yamada says. He tilts his head to the side. “Why wouldn’t you be, listener?”

Because I thought I would’ve been locked up by now, or at the very least shoved into someone else’s hands entirely.

“I—I don’t have a uniform anymore?” He winces even as he says it, his mind scrambling for a better excuse that won’t get him laughed at.

“UA covers the cost of up to two additional replacement uniforms, listener. There’s one ready for you there as we speak.”

Izuku’s mouth forms a little *o* shape, because fuck, now isn’t *that* convenient?

“As I was saying,” Aizawa cuts in, “the checkup with Chiyo will happen once every week for at least the rest of the month. That part is non-negotiable, but we can talk more on the school situation when it happens.”

Five. There are five cracks in the table now, this one nearly naked to the human eye. Izuku didn’t even realize he had taken to drumming his fingers along the edge of it until now.

He swallows drily. He doesn’t like the term non-negotiable, but he doesn’t argue. He can try to change that once it happens; picking your battles is important.

“The next thing regards one of the new rules.” Aizawa’s voice sounds more cautious, and Yamada’s gaze slides over to meet Izuku’s again. *Fuck.* “We wanted to address something that Hizashi found at your

building the morning after the incident. This isn't exactly your fault entirely, and this also isn't what you might be expecting—"

Izuku blinks at the sudden, jarring noise in his mind. It's like an alarm bell has gone off, and he tunes the man out almost without meaning to as he focuses on the area around him. He hears footsteps near them, feels something approaching from the left side of the hallway. It's close, and it's moving fast.

"Kid? What—?"

Before he can reply that there's someone *coming in their direction, watch the door,* there's the jingling of a key near the entrance, and then the door to the apartment is being flung open, sending the cats scattering;

The couple in the room had tensed at the sound of the keys, but upon seeing who's at the doorway now, the two heroes relax.

"I've arrived early for once!" Kayama Nemuri boasts in a sing-song voice, kicking the door shut behind her as she swaggers further into the apartment. "Isn't that fantastic!"

"Nemuri, I told you to text one of us when you were coming over," Aizawa says through gritted teeth, obviously annoyed, and Izuku's eyes widen a little.

"Oh, come off it, Shouta!" The r-rated hero walks right past them to set the three bags she's carrying on the counter. "I texted Hizashi, ya know, but it's like neither of you like to answer me anymore. I just came by to see my baby, and I'd like to see you just *try* and stop me from—*ah! There he is!"*

Midnight cuts off with a delighted gasp as Sushi darts toward her from the hallway, tail held high. The cat jumps into her waiting arms when Kayama kneels down, and Izuku watches as they have their reunion, slightly confused.

He doubts it could've been more than a week since the two last saw each other, but who is he to judge? He was the same way with Missy when Yamada picked her up from the vet's.

While the voice hero is content in rifling through the bags Kayama brought with curiosity, Aizawa is busy thunking his head on the table. Which, okay, *same.*

Izuku flushes when his arts teacher stands up with Sushi held in her arms and looks at him, sky blue eyes meeting emerald ones.

“Ooh, look who’s here,” she teases, seeming to recognize him instantly. “Morning, Midoriya.”

Does she know about everything? What do I say? She doesn’t look too surprised.

He glances at Aizawa briefly, who’s now watching the interaction closely. The man doesn’t offer any help in answering, not that Izuku expected him to, so the boy just slides off the chair and shifts into a quick bow, hands held in fists at his sides. This is *awkward.*

“Kayama-sensei!” He greets, entirely unsure of himself. This is a whole ‘nother person in the apartment. This is someone different who can witness his tomfoolery. He has to be careful. He has to be *Midoriya.* “Good morning! It’s nice—”

The breath is nearly punched from his lungs when the pro lurches forward to grab him by the shoulder, pulling him close to her side with surprising ease. “No need to bother with the boring pleasantries, kid! It’s nice to see ya looking healthy for once!”

Izuku is stiff as a board, eyes wide as saucers as the teacher roughly messes up his hair. Sushi is meowing contently by his ear, still clutching Kayama’s arm, and he looks smug at the turn of events.

“You know, I just knew you were different,” Kayama sighs dramatically, almost wistfully. “To think I’ve been talking with my future nephew for weeks now without knowing it! Crazy, right?”

The boy sputters, face turning beet red as he processes what she said. *What? Her future what?*

“Nemuri,” Aizawa warns, and the other hero cackles loudly.

“I was only joking, come on.” She lets Izuku go and tips her head thoughtfully to the side, eyes glittering in the light. “Well, partially. But anyway, I brought goodies for you boys!”

Izuku is left standing in place when she joins Yamada in the kitchen to take out the rest of her goods. The two teachers greet each other fondly, matching smirks on their faces.

That’s slightly concerning, a voice in Izuku’s head says, and the boy

ends up nodding In agreement. *Very. They could be plotting world domination and we'd never know it.*

Aizawa sighs. "We can finish that conversation later, then," he whispers to himself, and Izuku's heart gives a jolt inside his chest.

He's probably talking about what he was going to say before Kayama arrived. If he's saying this now, just how important is it? Why can't he just quickly tell Izuku? Will it be a long conversation?

Aizawa turns to him and places a heavy hand on his head, making Izuku frown a little. That's the third time today someone has touched his hair, and it's weird for him to think about how he doesn't mind it at all. "Visiting hours are open at the hospital, so I should get going. You're in charge of those two while I'm gone."

Izuku nearly *ascends* with the trust being extended to him, even though he knows it's mostly a joke, and he watches the man gather up the rest of his things before saying goodbye to the other two.

Fuck. Why is Izuku worrying so much suddenly? Aizawa is coming back. He's just visiting Ingenium in the hospital before the man is released in the near future; it's not like he's going out on patrol. He'll be fine. There's no reason for him to get hurt or something.

Which means Izuku has no reason to be feeling so… dreadful.

The door seems to shut with a kind of finality when Aizawa leaves, and Izuku glares at the wood for a few moments after. *He'll be fine. Quit it.*

He wraps his arms around himself, glancing back at his teachers. Kayama seems to have brought a ton of stuff over, which is interesting. She said she had just come over to see Sushi, right? So why would she have all of this stuff?

Aizawa mentioned that she was supposed to text when she was on the way, so it's not like this was a spur of the moment decision. Which leads Izuku to thinking this wasn't so accidental after all. Her timing can't be accidental either.

Is she here to babysit him? To babysit Yamada and him? It's not like Izuku *wants* her to go, but it doesn't look like she's planning on leaving anytime soon.

He doesn't need a babysitter, he's not a *child*—

“I brought juice boxes!” Kayama grins, and Izuku’s breath hitches.

“Oh my god,” he says, walking over quickly. “What flavor!”

Yamada laughs. “It’s all apple juice, listener. She doesn’t like any other kind of juice at all.”

“Not even grape juice?”

Kayama shudders. “I despise grape juice. It’s disgusting, and any person who drinks it is a barbarian.”

Now *that* just won’t stand. Izuku loves grape juice, but only when it's really cold. If it’s not cold, he agrees that it’s absolutely revolting. “Grape juice is the backbone of this society,” he mutters, making the other two laugh without meaning to.

Izuku is handed one of the boxes of apple juice, and he wastes no time in slurping it down. If he can focus on drinking, maybe he’ll forget that awful feeling in his chest.

“Are you ready, kiddo?”

He glances up at Yamada in question, about to ask what for, but Kayama answers first with her eyebrows wagging mischievously. “We’re going to trash this place while Shouta’s gone, Midoriya. You up for it?”

Oh, that sounds like a *great* idea.

Izuku is used to awkwardness.

He’s a little awkward and shy himself, so it’s only fitting that he’d be used to it by now. But he wasn’t quite ready for the awkwardness that would come along with talking to Kayama at first.

His teacher told him not to refer to her by sensei or Midnight here, as she’s off-duty, so Izuku guesses that puts her in the same boat as Yamada and Aizawa.

The awkwardness didn't last long, though, as Kayama is easy to talk to when she's like this. As she said, she's not her hero self right now—she's just Kayama. She's much calmer and sweeter than the R-rated hero is perceived as. Kayama is more attentive to emotion, almost like a mother.

She has that kind of open air to her with an added bit of fire, and her quirk feels the same way. Izuku is definitely going to be committing her quirk's feel to memory from now on; he doesn't know why he didn't do so before.

Hm, maybe not a mother. She's more like a vodka aunt.

The hero is wearing a fluffy purple and gold sweater with her hair tied back, her kind eyes locked on his as he speaks to her about her quirk and about missions he's taken before.

There's just something about her that makes Izuku ramble even more than he does already. He can't stop the words from pouring out now that there's someone else willing to *listen* to him.

And she doesn't just listen. She interacts! She laughs and cringes and adds onto some of the stories he tells with enthusiasm and even tells him some of her own. Yamada is enjoying this as well, Izuku knows, because he starts to take pictures of whatever they do.

Probably to send to Aizawa.

They start with a pillow fort in the living room, and Izuku is proud to say that this is probably one of the most structurally-sound things he's ever had the pleasure of building! They moved the coffee table out of the way and instead used it to put something heavy over the edges of the sheets.

There's surprisingly a ton of space on the inside, and Izuku nearly squeals with glee when Yamada brings out a small nighttime projector that lights up the space with small stars and galaxies of different colors.

Does Izuku want it? Of course he does, but he refrains himself from asking for one. He's holding out hope that one day Yamada will just offer it to him, even though he knows it's super unlikely.

"Now, what is *with* your hair, kid? We gotta fix this." Kayama shakes her head and digs around in her purse, muttering something about how she's brought just the supplies for this occasion. She somehow

manages to pull out a *fuck* ton of stuff from her small bag, including a whole hairdryer and a set of what looks like very expensive hair scissors and combs.

Who just carries a hairdryer on them? What the fuck? And how does all of that just stay in that purse? There's no room!

It's almost like this was planned. Like this is an intervention.

Yamada tilts his head at him. "Do you want to cut your hair, Midoriya? Nem's a very good hairdresser, I promise. She even does my hair sometimes if I'm too tired to do it."

The boy hesitates only for a moment. He's been meaning to cut his hair for a long time but has never had the time or patience to do it. It wasn't a priority for him. But that's why he probably looks like a trash gremlin to many, and that may also be why he wants to change it now.

Maybe more change will be good. Izuku feels like he's too stuck on the past.

The two teachers get excited when he says yes, and they start to tear down the fort to make room for the hair cutting. Why they need so much room, Izuku doesn't know. He'd be fine with getting just a quick, maybe even sloppy cut, but it appears they don't think that's acceptable.

Kayama instructs him to sit in the chair she put in the middle of the living room, and once she drapes a sheet over his shoulders and manages to get a good look at the state of his head, she tuts. "You don't know proper hair care, do you?"

He laughs nervously, fiddling with his hands in his lap. "I do, but I usually just give up on styling it. It's too curly to do anything with it, really."

"It's alright, hon. I've wrangled in curlier hair than this before." Kayama's voice turns dark. "And besides, I like being challenged."

Izuku snorts, wanting to make a joke but holding himself back. *Not yet. I've gotta hold it in.*

Yamada comes out of the bathroom with a bottle of product to put in his hair first, saying that it'll be a good kind to use on his curls. Whether or not that's true, Izuku doesn't care, because he's too busy

focusing on the feeling of gentle hands in his hair and the sound of muted conversations happening around him.

It feels nice, is the thing. The product smells like strawberries, and it reminds Izuku faintly of Kacchan. It leaves his hair feeling soft and bouncy and light, and he finds that it's definitely an improvement to how it was before.

When it's time to actually cut it, the process doesn't take too long. Kayama is definitely an expert somehow, and she doesn't waste time. She asks the boy how he wants it trimmed exactly, but Izuku just shrugs and says to do whatever she wants, he doesn't exactly mind.

And so Izuku is slightly surprised when Kayama eventually steps back and hands him a mirror, asking him if he likes it or not or wants it changed.

She actually didn't do much of anything but trim it like how one regularly would. There are no stray pieces falling into his eyes anymore, and there aren't any noticeable rough patches on his head from where the fire had burnt some of it off. The curls on the sides of his head have been cut shorter, thus putting emphasis on his jaw and face.

The product also seemed to add more volume, so Izuku's hair looks like a proper, *cleaner* bush now. Like one of those finely trimmed bushes you see at amusement parks.

And it's not bad, really. Just different. It's still inherently Izuku, but with a small twist.

The entire time he's looking in the mirror, he doesn't notice or even acknowledge the thin scar on his face even once.

Izuku lets out a small smile after handing the mirror back. "I love it," he says, thanking her, and Kayama and Yamada both give a little cheer.

He doesn't stop Yamada when the voice hero starts to braid the longer strands on the top of Izuku's head. He adds in more of that conditioner-thing (Izuku should really ask him what that is—he has a feeling Kacchan would know) to make it easier, and Kayama brings out a handful of small flowers to put in between the twists.

Again, how she even managed to keep live flowers in her purse along with everything else in there, Izuku doesn't know. That may just

become one of the great mysteries of the world.

Makeup is next on the list of things to do, apparently, and Izuku is *ecstatic.* He secretly loves the idea of makeup. He's used some before, of course, but only some concealer and foundation to hide some of his bruises when he was a little younger. He was still stupid then, though, so he doubts he was any good at it, but it must've worked somewhat.

"You've got nice lashes, kid, I'm jealous!" Kayama puts her hands on her hips as she studies him. "Your face is perfectly symmetrical, too. It's a wonder you don't have all your classmates tripping over you by now!"

Izuku flushes a deep shade of red and glances away, a dumb grin on his face. He's never even thought of that before now. He's never even entertained the thought that anyone would be looking at him, because why would they be? He's nothing really special to look at.

He's been told he's rather plain-looking. And not to mention slightly scary and off-putting.

After Kayama and Yamada both explain to him the best ways to apply blush and cover up dark spots, Izuku tries on Midnight's glasses with a giggle. It's a little too big for his face, and it looks comical on him, but he likes it a lot.

But when Yamada lets him try on his own Present Mic glasses, obviously Izuku likes those ones better. He loves the slight orange tint.

He puts up a peace sign and a shit-eating grin when Yamada snaps another photo of him, and at the same time Sushi bats at the orange glasses and knocks them off his face. It's a perfectly timed, *horrendous* photo, and Izuku really hopes that that one isn't going to be sent to Aizawa.

That would be embarrassing.

"Aw, you love him, don't you, Sushi?" Kayama coos at the cat, picking him up to cradle again in her arms.

Damm. Another traitor. Or am I technically the traitor, since Sushi was Kayama's cat first?

Wait, what? That doesn't even make sense.

The trio put on a new All Might documentary while eating the lunch that Kayama had brought over along with all the other snacks, and Izuku is practically vibrating as he writes down what he sees in his journal. He knows that half of what the documentary is saying is probably untrue, but he writes it all down anyway so he can ask All Might about it later.

If he'll ever get a chance to.

His hands are still shaking from this morning, but it's not as bad, and it doesn't quite ache. His excitement outweighs the discomfort.

Kayama teases him a bit about his fanboy-ish behavior, but he doesn't get embarrassed. He knows by now that she's only joking. She never once asks him to stop or comments on how weird it is, so Izuku keeps going.

It's nice, he thinks again, a softer feeling settling in his stomach now, to be *listened* to.

And when he catches sight of his washed face in the mirror when he goes to the bathroom halfway through the documentary, he doesn't avert his eyes away like he normally does.

He likes the new look, and he thinks that this time, maybe, just maybe it's okay to like it *unapologetically*.

When Kayama eventually has to go, leaving Yamada and him alone until Aizawa's return, Izuku suddenly realizes that he was smiling almost the entire time they were joking around.

He didn't even realize it.

It's interesting, at least to Hizashi, how much someone can figure out about a person in only a few short minutes upon meeting them.

When he first met Midoriya that day in the alley, he got to talk to him for less than a minute before the kid scampered off, seemingly in a

hurry to get somewhere.

Or to leave the situation as quickly as possible. There's a difference between the two of them.

Midoriya didn't seem scared then, even when facing down those bullies. He was more nervous, Hizashi thinks. Jittery.

And maybe he was a *little* intimidated near the end, but that's only because Hizashi is a rather big man who towers over the average person. Hizashi was also trying to scare away the other kids, too, so that's definitely what might've caused the green-haired boy to become nervous and ultimately led to him leaving as fast as he did.

Their second meeting was at the laundromat, and Hizashi was able to learn more about the kid and his personality. He learned that the kid likes to listen to Melanie Martinez (sitting so close to the other allowed him to hear the songs almost clearly through those shitty earbuds), and he also learned that the kid has a talent for drawing and observing people.

Hell, Hizashi is *still* in awe over how easily the boy seems to just analyze and take stock of a situation that sometimes hasn't even occurred yet. And his art skills! Hizashi would love to see more of that, as he likes to draw in his free time, too. He knows he'll have to wait for that, though.

Midoriya seemed embarrassed the few times he would work up the courage to show Hizashi some of his works, most of those consisting of quick sketches of heroes and villains he'd pass by on the streets, and others consisting of beautiful landscapes and void-filled rooms he'd conjure up in his mind.

The kid also has an affinity for stars, Hizashi had quickly learned sometime at the start of their visits. That was just another thing Hizashi could add to the list of interesting things about the Laundromat Kid.

And it's interesting, really, how just under a year later, this is where they are. Midoriya is no longer just the Laundromat Kid; he's one of Hizashi's students, and he's a fine hero-in-the-making. He's a vigilante who has one of the kindest hearts Hizashi has ever seen, and yet in that he also has one of the *quietest* ones.

Midoriya is softer in calmer settings and environments. He's more timid, almost, like he's unsure of himself. Of if he's even allowed to be

where he is at that very moment.

It's like he has the awkward tenderness of a kid who's never been fully cared for and is forced to improvise.

And at first glance, one would just assume he's quiet in general, but he can definitely be eccentric, as given by his alter ego. Hizashi still stands firm in his previous observations about him, though. *Everyone* has a side to them that they don't want anyone seeing, and Midoriya's just so happens to be the side that Hizashi is trying to focus on, because if he can see that side, that part of himself that Midoriya is trying to ignore, maybe help will be easier to dole out and receive.

He had watched the way Midoriya talked with Nemuri the whole time here, and he was mildly surprised at what he saw. Hizashi is very glad his friend ended up coming over after all, as it's riveting to see how the boy acts around someone else outside of school.

Now, he can't quite put his finger on it, but Midoriya was definitely acting differently when conversing with Nemuri. He was definitely happier, Hizashi thinks, but there was also a sense of trepidation there, and it was hard to miss the hesitance in every movement he made.

Since he was looking for it then, he could see it on Midoriya's face—the fresh *panic*. The guilt. And he had wondered, not for the first time, what could have possibly gotten him so scared.

Now that Nemuri is gone due to an impromptu meeting at her agency, Hizashi finds himself wishing that Shouta will just come home soon from his visit to Tensei.

He wants his husband here so he can help. He already feels bad about his other half missing out on the self-care period that Nemuri had thrown at him, and plus! Hizashi is excited for Shouta to see the kiddo's new haircut!

He'd been texting him photos and videos to make up for it, of course, but it's not the same. He knows Shouta won't be upset, as he probably already knew this would happen, but it doesn't hurt to complain a *little*.

Last night was rough for all members of the household. Hizashi remembers how scared he'd been when he found out Midoriya was gone, and he remembers the relief that had shot through him like a bullet when he got the hurried texts from Shouta, saying that he

thinks he found the runaway. Hizashi was already back at home and anxiously waiting for their return when he got the call, and he had to remind himself that fainting would *not* be a good idea.

Shouta didn't sound so good over the phone either. None of them were faring very well at the turn of events.

After spending years around Shouta, he's gotten pretty good at being able to just tell how his husband is feeling at first glance. He can usually tell what he's thinking, too, but that's only because Hizashi is privy to that. He knows how Shouta works, and he knows how Shouta *is*.

He's easy to read when he's comfortable and safe in the privacy of their shared home. He's always a little happier. More carefree.

And so Hizashi's heart had promptly cracked last night when the door opened and his husband trailed in after Midoriya. There was this *look* on his face. His expression was one Hizashi could never miss.

It was one of terror. Of confusion and slight anger. Shouta was angry then, he knows—but not really at the kid, no. At everything *else*.

And it's not even an unfamiliar look, if he's being honest. Hizashi himself wears that look sometimes when the days get a little too long, when his voice seems to die in his throat before the words can come out.

It's a blessing and a curse to be able to read Shouta so well, because god, he *hates* seeing him so upset. But that's just how it is, he guesses. He's just glad he's allowed to see his husband like that at all. It's much more preferable than Hizashi being kept in the dark, so to speak. That would hurt both parties instead of help.

They're in this together, given by how both heroes can read each other like an open book.

But *Midoriya,* Hizashi finds, is not so easy to read.

The boy's eyes are like mirrors. One tends to see more of themself than of him when they look his way. They see their own fears and desires.

That's his gift, the voice hero thinks. To read a person and mirror what they need back to them. It's sort of like what Hizashi does as a radio show host. He has to know how to entertain people—he has to

know how to keep them occupied and leaping from one train of thought to the next, as that's what brings in the best ratings and feedback.

The listener has an incredible attention to detail, and he's always so considerate and kind. It's what makes him an incredible hero in the making and also a *terrifying* vigilante.

Hizashi doesn't know if he truly wants to see the boy in his other persona. He's been told about Rabbit before, but he's never experienced the boy's recklessness himself. He's never had to see that particular mask. That mirror.

Rather, he's only ever seen the one Midoriya himself wears all the time. And isn't that ironic? Behind the mask is another mask. One that's arguably more difficult to see past than the physical one that goes with his costume.

It's rare, but once or twice—between one moment and the next—the mirror breaks, and Hizashi can see past those walls. He can see a little into the listener's mind, and what he finds there is unnerving.

Midoriya has no demons, he quickly comes to realize. There is no room for petty demons where Midoriya's concerned. It's like the devil himself hides behind his eyes—in his past. Something that Hizashi is becoming more and more anxious about. The kid isn't giving them anything in regards to why his father just *isn't* around or able to be contacted. It's not like it's normal for a teenager as young as Midoriya to be homeless and alone.

And it's *definitely* not normal for a kid to lie about living with said father and to also somehow get away with it. Seriously, how did no one realize that the documents Midoriya had were fake? How didn't anyone see that they were forged or otherwise edited?

If someone had just checked—if *Hizashi* had just used one of his agency's in-depth programs to check, maybe Midoriya wouldn't be in the uncomfortable position he's in right now. Maybe they would've been able to help him sooner.

He wouldn't have had to almost die in a stupid bombing the same day that he participated in the Sports Festival.

The thing is that the past needs to come out, if only so they can find a way to help him, a more *permanent* way to help him. But Hizashi won't push. He can't do that or he'll risk harming him further.

And it's this mystery that makes him wonder what others see when they look at the boy. What someone like Bakugou sees—as he will certainly see the most. He's apparently Midoriya's best friend since childhood, according to All Might and previous observations, so does Midoriya let him in? Or does he push him away, too?

Can Bakugou see through the mirrors?

Hizashi can only overlook those walls when Midoriya lets him. The trust is building, but it's a slow process.

He can only hope he can learn to help Midoriya before he accidentally hurts himself.

The voice hero seems to be doing okay, at least, as he gets the question just a couple hours after Nemuri has to leave. He's currently threading his fingers through Midoriya's hair and carefully taking out all of the flowers twisted in the curls. Keeping Up With The Kardashians can be heard playing where they left off, and the voice hero is pleasantly surprised to see that Midoriya put on subtitles, too.

Hizashi prefers subtitles on most shows and movies, whether in English or Japanese, if only so he can practice lip-reading whenever he wants to give his ears a break.

(Which reminds him that after this he needs to change the batteries to his hearing aids. He does it every five days because of how often he uses them, which admittedly isn't as bad as how often his old ones needed to be changed.)

Midoriya seems to be quite invested in the show now, as he's sitting with his knees drawn up to his chest, mouth slightly agape as he hangs onto every juicy detail. Watching other people navigate their screwed up life is a comfort for many, and Midoriya doesn't seem to be an exception to this.

He likes distractions almost as much as he likes hiding, Hizashi thinks.

The kid looks like he's thinking very hard about what's happening on screen, so it comes as a surprise to Hizashi when he speaks without preamble.

"Is he angry at me?"

It's quiet, almost tentative in the barely-lit living room. Hizashi frowns

to himself, fingers pausing in the boy's hair momentarily as he processes the question. "Who? Shouta?"

He gets a short nod in return, and Hizashi's heart sinks even further inside his chest. The fact that Midoriya is even trusting him enough right now to confide in him like this, to reveal that he's *worried,* is a step in the right direction, but that doesn't make it any less painful.

"Why would you think that, kiddo?"

He watches as his student squirms in his spot, noting the way he rocks back and forth a little and tips his head to the side, refusing to look back at Hizashi even as he speaks to him. They're both on the floor in front of the couch, facing the television since the coffee table is still pushed off to the side.

In this position, Hizashi can't see Midoriya's face to gauge his reaction, but he *can* see the way the kid presses his nails into his palms in a sort of nervous tic. Midoriya shifts suddenly, almost seemingly at the reminder that he shouldn't be doing that, and starts to drum his fingers along his forearm.

Shouta does the same thing when he can't figure something out.

"Because I ran," Midoriya eventually settles on, and Hizashi blinks.

Is that what he's been worried about? He's still stuck on last night? Oh, Hizashi has to stop this quickly. He didn't think this would still be an issue, but he was obviously wrong.

"You did," he agrees slowly, matter-of-factly. "And that's okay." A slight tilt of the head. "You know that, right? Just because you left, listener, doesn't mean you're not welcome back. You can always come back."

What he means is *we'll never kick you out. We're not ever going to punish you by holding that above your head.*

Midoriya doesn't speak for a long while, and Hizashi knows he's thinking long and hard about something. The hero briefly hopes that he's mulling over those words and realizing that they're not lies.

Did he think they'd kick him out because of what he did? Did he *want* to get kicked out?

He really, really hopes not.

Hizashi goes back to checking dark green hair for the rest of the flowers, and he waits patiently for Midoriya to continue—if he even chooses to at all. He doesn't mind either way. You can't always rush progress.

But then: "Are *you* mad at me?"

It's this question that makes Hizashi pause, two hands still holding onto a lock of hair where he was untangling a leaf from a newly-formed knot. The way the boy's voice changes on the word *you* nearly shatters Hizashi's heart anew.

He lets his hands rest in his lap for a second, and he shifts a little to look at the side of Midoriya's face, his student's head tilting to finally meet his gaze in response. "Do I look mad?"

It's not meant to be mean or passive aggressive or sarcastic—none of that. It's a simple question, because Hizashi is curious now. He wants to know, because if Midoriya is truly reading Hizashi that way, then something obviously has to change. He doesn't want the other to constantly be worried about something like that.

"No?" Midoriya says. He looks away and scratches at his jaw, and it's the *attention,* Hizashi realizes. He doesn't like the attention on him. "But you could—you could also be hiding it to be polite."

And *bingo.* There it is. Now Hizashi knows what he's working with. Now he knows the best approach to this.

"I'm not mad at you, Midoriya. I could never be mad at you."

Midoriya snorts suddenly, and Hizashi *swears* he hears him say something like *I really don't want to test that out,* but it's obvious he wasn't meant to hear that part, so he doesn't comment on it.

He just smiles softly, slightly amused. "Let me rephrase that." He pokes Midoriya's cheek teasingly before going back to his job. "There's very little you could do to upset me, and even then, running like you did last night isn't counted on that list. I told you that this morning, didn't I?"

Midoriya fidgets, eyebrows furrowing in concentration as he thinks. Probably weighing whether or not he should believe him. "Well, yeah, but you also said you were *worried.* And that's not… *okay.* I didn't mean to—" He cuts himself off when his voice gets higher, and when he continues, the words are more quiet. "I didn't mean to make you

worry."

Didn't you?

"Kiddo, I'm always going to worry. That's just who I am!" He scoots up to sit beside the teen and passes some of the flowers into his open palms. He has a feeling the kid might not want to throw them away just yet. "But that doesn't even matter now, you know. I'm just glad you're okay. There's no need to beat yourself up about it, yeah?"

Midoriya frowns down at the different flowers in his hands, and it's obvious to Hizashi that he won't be getting an answer, not that he was expecting one in the first place. The fact that he got even this far with the conversation is astounding. He thought the kid would have closed off immediately after asking the question.

It's a welcome step in the right direction, and it has Hizashi's heart swelling. *Progress.*

Midoriya is staring down at the cats now, and Hizashi tips his head, going out on a limb. "Say, here's a random one: what makes you happy? I don't think I've asked you that in months." He grins widely, wagging his finger. "And you can't say journaling this time! It's gotta be somethin' else!"

While the silence was expected, it still hurts a little when it drags on. Midoriya looks to be concentrating long and hard on an answer. It's obvious that he doesn't know how to respond.

And oh, what Hizashi would give to figure out what's going on in that head of his. The green-haired boy writes so well whenever he takes notes or tests, so Hizashi knows his mind must be a disastrous place.

"Arson?"

It's said hesitantly, but with a slight uptilt at the end, as if he's trying to make a joke. Hizashi laughs at the abruptness of it and roughly swipes Midoriya's hair. "That's rockin', kiddo! I should've expected that from you, huh? But do you think you have something a little more socially acceptable? Something you do more often?"

"Arson *should* be more acceptable."

Hizashi sighs dramatically. "I second that. It's too bad not everyone appreciates the flair that fire gives off."

Midoriya nods, giggling in agreement but otherwise not offering a verbal reply.

The kid doesn't keep talking after that, maybe because he doesn't know what else there is to say in answer to the question, or maybe because he's thinking of something else. He looks a little troubled now, which is definitely not what Hizashi wanted. He had only wished to distract Midoriya and keep the conversation flowing, but that has seemed to backfire on him at the moment.

Hizashi just hopes that eventually he'll be allowed to help the boy with whatever's troubling him. It's easier to do things when you have someone right beside you, supporting you every step of the way.

He knows that too well.

Are there any specific do's and don'ts when it comes to hugs? Any social rules Izuku should be aware of so he doesn't screw something up?

While Izuku is skilled in the art of body language, both in replicating and reading it, he's not so skilled in the social norms that revolve around domestic settings—ones like the scene he's currently in.

He's sitting on top of the fridge and watching Yamada cook, just trying his best to stay quiet and not disturb the other. It might not be as high as a rooftop, but the height is something for Izuku. It's a vantage point.

Would it be acceptable to ask for a hug?

He wants one, strangely enough. Izuku has never been one to initiate physical contact with people, and it's likely that he's not going to start now, but last night was strange.

Yamada had hugged him, right? Well, hug would be a strong word considering the fact that he didn't exactly hug back, but it can still be classified as one. And maybe that's why he wants a hug now—to try again. To get it right this time.

Izuku *is* a perfectionist in most situations, after all.

The hug was warm and nice, and it was *safe.* So sue him for wanting another one. He just feels that out of the very few people he can compare him to, Yamada gives the best physical contact.

His quirk always feels bubbly and gentle, yet strong in the way that an ocean is often described to be.

Izuku narrows his eyes. *What would an Aizawa hug feel like?*

The underground hero doesn't dole out that sort of contact, so it's irrational to even consider that as an option, but it's still an apt comparison.

Would it feel different than how Yamada's hug was, or would it be similar? He's seen Yamada and Aizawa hug each other like *twice* during his entire stay here, so he doesn't really know. There's nothing much to go off of.

Fuck, this is stupid. How pathetic is Izuku for trying to rationalize what a goddamn *hug* would feel like? That's not what normal people do, right? That's dumb.

He huffs, aggravated with himself now. His fingers run through his hair, and he gets even more irritated at how there are no knots in the curls anymore. It's illogical and senseless, sure, but the change makes him even more upset.

Don't get him wrong, Izuku does like his haircut! And he appreciates how soft and clean it feels now—it's just weird.

It's something he's never really done before. Something he's never really been allowed to do in his previous situation.

Basic hygiene, Kayama had called it, and while Izuku kind of doubts that the average person goes through that weekly, he finds that he wouldn't mind doing it all again. It was fun.

The boy rests his arms on his knees and watches the blond hero cook, mentally cataloguing each movement and ingredient being used. Yamada is following a recipe from a paper titled *Dietary Plans,* which has Izuku's eye twitching.

He doesn't want to see Recovery Girl on Monday. He really does *not.* He trusts her way more than any other medical professional out there

(except for maybe the doctor at the Club), but that still doesn't change the fact that what she represents is a danger to Izuku and his very existence.

And it's not like the checkup will just happen once and everything will be forgotten, no. Aizawa said it'll be *weekly*. As in, every Monday morning for the unseeable future, or at least until he starts to show signs of being completely healed.

Which Izuku knows will probably never happen, even though he feels fine as it is.

Recovery Girl isn't his only dilemma right now. What about the parent-teacher conferences? They were supposed to happen sometime last week, but the boy doubts that they occurred with one of the homeroom teachers being unavailable. Aizawa hasn't said anything about them either, so it's all just so confusing.

Izuku doesn't realize he's voicing these thoughts aloud until Yamada spares him a quick glance while cutting potatoes.

"The conferences were moved to Thursday, kiddo. They can't actually hold any of 1-A's hero course meetings without the teach being there, yeah?" He hums to himself, answering his own question. "Principal Nezu said there was just too much stuff going on to *not* delay it a bit."

Too much stuff going on? It's obvious what he could be referring to.

Izuku blinks slowly at the man's back, slightly irked now. He wants to ask a question, but is he allowed to? He's asked a lot of things recently; he wouldn't want to annoy the hero.

No. Yamada is different. He won't mind.

The boy holds out his arms to catch Sushi when the animal jumps up onto the fridge. This seems to be the cat's favorite spot, too.

"Can I ask you another question?" Izuku ventures, stroking up and down along Sushi's pelt.

"You just did," Yamada replies cheekily, throwing him a grin. "But you can ask more. You know I love questions."

Izuku does know. Yamada is not like the mentors and teachers he's had in the past. The voice hero actually encourages questions, as he believes that that's better in helping students learn and develop.

“Did the principal push back the internships for everyone because of me?”

There’s a silent, almost suffocating moment. Yamada stops stirring the sauce he’s working on and turns around again with a slight frown on his face. “Say, how do you know about the internships? That's supposed to be a secret from the students.”

Izuku flushes, instantly realizing his mistake. Shit. He fucked up. He got a little too comfortable. “Eh, sorry! I didn’t even mean to find out, really! It was just—” He breaks off, wincing. Is he really going to lie to him now? After that conversation this morning? Izuku *was* searching for info regarding UA’s schedules so he could be prepared and in the know. It’s not like he just happened across those emails from the Principal to surrounding hero agencies. “Sorry. I didn’t...” He lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “Aizawa’s been letting me use his work tablet.”

What he means by that is *unrestricted access to the internet and a bored me don’t go well together.*

Yamada’s face lights up in understanding, but he doesn’t seem angry. He looks more amused than anything. “Don’t worry about it, Midoriya. We’re actually going to tell the students all about it on Monday.” He points his spoon at him with playfully narrowed eyes. “And pushing the internships back was a decision made by the whole staff for a variety of reasons. It wasn’t your fault at all.”

Maybe it wasn’t wholly Izuku’s fault, but he knows the hero agencies were probably pissed when they found out about the delay. While this does give them more time to send out their invitations and judge the students during the festival, this resulted in quite a few heroes having to change their schedule. See, according to the emails Izuku read, a lot of pro heroes were ordered to patrol around all of the agencies that were potentially taking in students, if only as added protection in light of the recent attack. But now those heroes had to be rescheduled in accordance with the new change.

And Izuku knows he would be a little annoyed by it, too.

“Besides, it was only a week pushed back. I assigned the students some reflective essays on their performances during the festival to keep them busy.” Yamada laughs lightly. “They loved that, I assure you.”

Geez, Izuku is grateful he didn’t have to do that. He is usually all for analysis work, but perhaps reflecting on his actions at the Sports

Festival, an event he only attended so he could spite his father, wouldn't have been the best idea. Especially since his last match with Kacchan didn't end quite as desirably as Izuku would've wanted.

I can barely remember what else happened before the last fight. Christ. I need to watch the replays.

"We'll start to prepare for the internships on Monday. We've also got a special surprise for you students, so look forward to that." The voice hero suddenly pauses, as if enlightened by something. "Hey, have you ever heard of the game twenty questions, listener?"

Excitement flashes across Midoriya's face at the prompt, and if every flower in the neighborhood started to bloom at the student's joy, it wouldn't be that much of a surprise.

This is a good start, Izuku thinks to himself, matching Yamada's smile after his irritation dies down a little. *Distractions are always nice.*

It would be something of an understatement to say that Izuku is surprised when Aizawa comes home and holds out a plain gray box, mumbling something about *you'll need this in the next couple days, so don't break it.*

He's so dumbfounded, in fact, that all he can do is stare at the gift for a few moments, face carefully blank as he lets it sit in Aizawa's outstretched hand. He doesn't quite understand what's happening.

"Midoriya," the underground hero says, snapping Izuku out of his momentary daze. "This is yours. Take it."

"It's mine?"

Aizawa just blinks and doesn't bother repeating himself, making Izuku jerk forward to accept the box so he doesn't seem ungrateful.

It's a present, right? That's what it is. Or at least what it could be

considered by definition.

Why would Izuku be receiving a present right now? Scratch that. Why would Izuku be receiving a present *ever?*

And what even is—?

Izuku's eyebrows fly to his hairline. He's sitting on the couch now, having walked away from Aizawa and Yamada to let the couple talk about whatever they wanted to talk together about in the kitchen.

This is a phone, he thinks. A *nice* phone.

He moves the cover of the box the rest of the way off and carefully takes the device out of its protective casings, barely breathing. *There's no way.*

The boy is slightly in awe. This is a phone that was released almost exclusively for heroes and other law enforcement. He can tell the make and model just by looking at it, and he remembers suddenly that this one just recently came out.

Which means the device currently in his hands is one of the most sought for and high-tech pieces of equipment out there.

This is something that Izuku would *never* be able to afford no matter how much time he spent saving up, and it's not like stealing it was on the table either. The security for this kind of stuff is arguably better than the security Endeavor had in his private office!

"Holy shit," he whispers, turning it over in his palms and marvelling at it.

In all honesty, the phone itself isn't that impressive. Izuku has made better machines with slimmer designs and a couple more capabilities, but it's just the fact that an official high-tech device is *here,* in his hold, that's making him a bit light-headed.

Because he doubts Aizawa stole this, which can only mean…

Izuku stands up abruptly and heads for the kitchen, scaring Meatball in the process.

Aizawa and Yamada are now both cooking dinner this time, moving together in tandem, and Izuku *almost* feels bad about interrupting them as he moves to stand in the doorway. Almost.

“I can’t accept this,” he blurts out, holding out the phone with the most serious expression he can muster. “I’m sorry, I can’t take this.”

They’re both facing him now, and Yamada is the first to react. “Huh? Why not, kiddo? Is it faulty?”

Izuku jolts, wincing suddenly when he realizes there really is no good way to put this. “No, no, it looks like it works perfectly! It’s just, ah, I can’t… have it. I might shatter the screen or something. It’s too good.”

Too good? What the fuck are you smoking? Now they’re looking at you weird!

Aizawa raises a brow. “Too good?”

It’s a prompt. He’s obviously asking for a better explanation, but Izuku knows just by the look on his face that Aizawa probably knows exactly why Izuku is upset. Yamada doesn’t look too clueless either.

Damn. Is Izuku that easy to read? Or maybe he’s just easy to predict?

He swallows and tries not to sound too pathetic as he corrects himself quietly: “It’s too expensive. I’ll… I could break it.”

Aizawa hums and wipes his hands on a dish towel. He shares the briefest of looks with Yamada before turning to Izuku fully and leaning back against the counter.

He looks tired, but then again he always does. This specific look actually feels much calmer than his other ones do. Perhaps he’s been waiting for such a scenario to occur.

“You don’t need to worry about stuff like that, Midoriya,” he says, gaze piercing. “Hizashi and I can more than afford a phone for you. But if it makes you that upset, I can assure you that it wasn’t as expensive as you’re probably thinking.”

Izuku sincerely doubts that, but he doesn’t voice this aloud. “Even still! It’s just—it’s too much!”

It’s not right that you give me all this stuff and I can’t even repay you for it all! It’s not fair to you guys!

“Hey, now, you know we have five jobs between the two of us, yeah?” Yamada pushes Izuku’s outstretched hand back towards him. “It’s okay, kiddo, really. And besides, we offered to help you and take care

of you, and we both knew what we were getting into prior to doing that. You needed the phone, and you deserve it, too, so I'd say it was money well-spent!"

Well-spent? Are they serious?

Izuku opens his mouth but then shuts it immediately, slightly frustrated now that the two teachers aren't *getting* it. Yamada's tone was soft but firm, brooking no room for argument, and dammit he's never *sounded* that way before. Not with Izuku. He's rarely been so clear cut in his methods.

The boy stares at the ground with furrowed brows, the phone still clutched tightly in his hands—god forbid he drops it over the hard kitchen floor—as he tries to rationalize what's happening.

Like Yamada said, they're not poor. Izuku knows that the couple is quite comfortable in their money situation, but *still.* Just how much was this phone? And why did Aizawa just up and buy it out of the blue like this?

Izuku didn't ask for it, obviously. He never would have had the nerve to do such a thing, especially since it's so expensive.

So why did he do it? Izuku's grateful, sure, but it's hard to enjoy something when you don't know what the catch to it is.

"Tsukauchi is being slow in giving your old phone back," Aizawa explains, turning back to dice a few spring onions. "It might be another couple of weeks or so until you can transfer everything over from that one, but it'll have to do." He points the knife at him. "You're going back to school on Monday, kid, so you'll need it."

Oh. So that's the catch. This is a *precaution.* it's a way for them to be able to contact him if things go wrong, and maybe to even *track* him if he ends up disappearing again.

It's a good reason, Izuku will admit, it really is. Despite this, he still stands there for a moment, not willing to try and sway them but also not willing to let it go.

Aizawa huffs and drops the knife onto the counter, noticing his hesitance. He swipes the phone from Izuku's grip and walks to the trash can. "Fine. If you're not going to use it, I'll just have to dispose of it since Hizashi and I already—"

Izuku practically shoots across the kitchen at the absurdity of the words, the briefest flicker of red lightning on his skin. “No! You can’t just throw something like that *away!* Are you *crazy?”*

He snatches it back and glares at the man, who just turns away with the ghost of a smile on his face, smug that his plan worked. Yamada is laughing now too, which makes the boy’s cheeks darken.

While he knew Aizawa probably wouldn’t actually dump a very expensive smartphone into a trashcan like that right after buying it, he couldn’t help himself. There’s just something about seeing such a costly device so close to trash that just *irks* Izuku.

“That was mean!” Izuku continues, cradling the phone to his chest in embarrassment. “You’re not even supposed to dispose of electronics with regular garbage, Aizawa! Everyone knows that! At least do it correctly next time if you’re going to scare me like that. That would be such a waste of money and supplies, you know.”

Aizawa switches places with the still-giggling Yamada and shoos Izuku with a hand. “That’s great, kid, now go set it up or something. Dinner’s not ready yet, so call your friends. Do some ‘teenager things.’ Scram.”

The reference feels like a slap to the face, and Izuku feels something warm settle over his skin after the initial burn. The underground hero never forgets.

He traipses to the guest room with his new phone in hand, still mumbling about Aizawa being an idiot and a grade-A hypocrite, because *seriously*. The man hates litterbugs and yet seemed to be willing to throw away such a good piece of tech! He could’ve at least thought about selling it!

“What a fool,” he says gruffly, sitting on his bed now.

You’re a fool, too, his brain reminds, and alright, he can’t really argue with that. He can definitely still be salty about it, though.

He takes a deep breath, a shiver running down his spine when he finally finishes the set up. He has his phone back—well, *a* phone. He can call and text people now.

A blessing and a curse, as Izuku is now obligated to do this next course of action. It would be shitty of him if he didn’t.

With slightly shaky fingers, Izuku types in the number he's had memorized for years and waits for Kacchan to answer.

Izuku has nothing against toast. Really.

He loves toast. He loves bread, and he even loves it when it's burnt so bad that it could pass as charcoal.

It's the texture, he thinks, that really makes bread what it is. Hard but soft at the same time, crunchy but just a tad bit soggy when you put butter on it. It's all very terrible. Disgusting, really.

And that's why Izuku *loves* it. When he could afford to do this back at his apartment, he would slice up a few large pickles and put them in between two slices of toast and some peanut butter, and he would eat it just like that.

Sometimes he would even dip the atrocity in hot sauce, which makes everything in life better.

Yeah. Izuku's completely fine.

He's sitting on the living room floor with his back up against the loveseat, turning a toaster over in his hands so he can get a good look at it. Little screws and mechanical parts are spread out all around him, cluttering the floor.

Izuku's been working on it for a few hours now, having already sketched out a basic design for the improvements he wants to add to it. Most of the framework is already done, he just needs to actually put the body back together correctly.

It's been a day since they all had that talk at breakfast, a day since Izuku was given that smartphone—the phone that's now being used to shed some light over his work, saying as it's well into the night and Izuku can't exactly see in the dark.

Without much of anything particularly stimulating or interesting to

do, Izuku had become sort of restless, which led to him taking apart the toaster and adding some new stuff to it to make it more *advanced.*

Missy seems to be entertained, though, as she's currently cuddling his legs while he works, face squished against the fluffy All Might blanket that's covering him. Yamada dug the blanket out of the closet for him just yesterday, saying that Aizawa would just have to deal with the number one hero's face being inside the apartment now.

And Izuku honestly couldn't agree more.

The voice hero allowed Izuku to repurpose one of his outdated laptops for this little project, and the device was definitely a worthy sacrifice, as it provided him with multiple vital parts, including the screen itself.

He's never integrated an AI into a toaster before, but he guesses he can check that off his bucket list once he's done. This is the most fun thing he's done in about a day, and it makes sense that he's surprised when he realizes four hours have already passed.

The minutes continue to bleed together seamlessly, and Izuku thinks back on the previous two days.

What makes you happy?

It was an innocent question, and it hit Izuku harder than he expected it to, especially because of just how invested Yamada looked to be in his reply. The man *truly* cares for what he has to say, and sure, Izuku has known that for quite a bit of time now, but he just can't help but marvel over it.

He can't help but wonder why it is that way, though. Izuku doesn't know what he could've done to warrant such attention and care from Yamada. Has it always just been like that and he never noticed?

And what *does* make Izuku happy? He's been mulling over the question ever since it was asked, and he still can't find a good answer for it.

He can't say doing analysis, and he can't exactly say fighting bad guys, so what's left? What else can he say?

It's frustrating. It's frustrating that he doesn't even know how to respond. He's been acting like everything is okay, because it *is,* and yet he still can't answer a question that most other people could

without hesitation.

He guesses he could say cooking or building, but those don't feel quite right either. It's like there's something *missing,* and it's pissing him off.

Izuku likes to keep busy, because keeping busy means he's being useful and productive, right? And Izuku likes being useful. But somehow he doesn't think Yamada would've appreciated *cleaning* as an answer, either, given by how he refuses to give Izuku any set chores around the house anyway.

The boy had asked him this morning if there were any duties he could do to lighten the load for the couple, but Yamada just said he didn't have to do anything or feel obligated to do any more chores than necessary—which, from an outside perspective, is nice, but still isn't the answer Izuku was looking for.

All kids have chores, right? Kacchan always had some at home when Izuku would come over, and the green-haired boy would always help out when he could. Mitsuki's only policy was that as long as he cleaned up after a mess he or Kacchan made, he was fine.

So why doesn't he have any chores *here?* He may just be a guest, but he's still draining their resources. He's being fed and clothed by them, so Izuku has to do *something* in return, even if it means he has to clean all the time.

Unsatisfied with Yamada's answer, he ended up going to Aizawa next, who ended up giving him a list of things he could do around the house with a gruff comment of *don't tell Hizashi.*

While Aizawa was also adamant in saying that he was by no means obligated to do any of them, Izuku still liked his answer better than Yamada's, and within four hours he had done everything on the list twice over and to the highest level of skill he could muster.

One of the chores included was to reorganize the pantry, and Izuku had a ton of fun with that.

So maybe separating the cans and boxes of food by color and not their actual contents isn't the best way to organize a cabinet, but whatever. It was fun watching Aizawa having to search through each color to find what foods he needed to make dinner. It was highly entertaining.

You know he secretly found it funny, too, something whispers to him,

and Izuku snorts.

These voices have been coming back to him more often now, and he honestly doesn't even hate them that much. They're not as disruptive or mean as they used to be, though sometimes he'll find himself talking aloud in response to a particular comment he heard and will see Aizawa giving him this *what the fuck are you doing* look.

Which is also very amusing. Izuku is going to keep doing that, but only when Aizawa is around.

Psychological fuckery is the best kind of warfare.

Although it's already a little late and Izuku has school tomorrow, the boy can't get himself to sleep just yet.

He didn't do much today besides clean and mess with the cats, though Yamada had promised him that they'll take him shopping as soon as possible. He's not sure how to feel about that. On one hand, going out means more freedom, more chances, while on the other hand it also means more exposure and temptation.

It's perfect, and that's what makes it so wrong.

There's footsteps coming from the hallway, and Izuku freezes immediately, head snapping up as his heart gives a little jolt inside his chest. *I thought everyone was asleep already?*

A tall figure pads into the kitchen, yawning, and Izuku feels himself start to relax when he recognizes the form. Aizawa is still up.

The man flips on the kitchen light, still unaware of Izuku hiding away in the dark living room, and the sound of a coffee maker brewing fills the silence. It seems like Aizawa must've been working prior to this, if the reading glasses he has on has anything to say about it.

Izuku tips his head. He had come out of his room just an hour or so after dinner, and he didn't see any light under Aizawa and Yamada's bedroom door or anything. He did see one in Yamada's studio, though, so the man must've been in there doing some work instead of the voice hero like Izuku had thought.

He watches as Aizawa pours the coffee in a mug and stirs a ton of sugar and creamer into it, breaths suddenly coming out shallow when the man appears under the archway, finally spotting him.

Izuku freezes like a deer caught in headlights, suddenly realizing how interesting he must look to outsiders.

But then again, when has he ever considered Aizawa to be an outsider?

The hero doesn't seem surprised in the slightest at the sight before him. He just blinks once, then twice, as if not quite processing what's happening yet. "So that's where the toaster went," is all he says.

Izuku just scrunches his nose at him and goes back to his work, skin itching a little now at how the man is scrutinizing him so openly.

He's never liked being observed. Especially by someone so smart. He doesn't want to imagine what the man would find if he decided to truly *look* at Izuku.

"Why are you up so late?" Aizawa flips off the kitchen light, and now that he's walking closer Izuku can spot the Present Mic-themed slippers on his feet. Whether or not those are his own or the property of his husband's is a question Izuku won't dare ask.

I wonder how he'll feel if I start wearing the All Might ones I stole. They need to be washed, though. Don't want to dirty up the apartment.

Speaking of, Izuku is running out of clothes to wear. The stuff he was given needs to be cleaned, and Izuku *knows* this. The issue is just *bringing it up.* He knows Yamada and Aizawa have a matching washer and dryer set here next to the office. He just doesn't know if he's allowed to use it.

What if he breaks it? He probably wouldn't know how to use it even if he's allowed. It would be easy to fuck something up and ruin it all, and god knows he wouldn't be able to afford fixing it for them—

A pink sugar packet hits Izuku's face, and it bounces off his cheek and lands on the floor next to his work.

Izuku turns to glare at the man, who blankly stares back at him before flopping onto the couch on his stomach, somehow managing to not spill his drink when he throws his glasses on the coffee table. And this is where Izuku realizes he hasn't answered the question yet, even though it's been a good twenty seconds already.

He flushes and looks back down at the toaster, adjusting the All Might blanket so it's over Missy as well. "I don't think it's that late. It's only

midnight."

He gets a soft hum in disapproval. "You should be getting at least seven hours of sleep every night, kid. Set some alarms on your phone if you have to." The man rubs his face. "You're just going to hurt yourself by not giving your body the proper rest it needs. Especially now."

Damn, Izuku thinks suddenly. *He's starting to remind me of AINA. What a drag.*

"But you're awake right now, too," he points out, quirking a brow. "Don't you think it's a little hypocritical to say that stuff to me?"

Aizawa side-eyes him. "That's different. I'm an adult, so I can stay up whenever I please. *You,* on the other hand, have been ordered to rest by multiple certified doctors who know what they're talking about. You'd do good to listen to them, brat."

"An adult, huh? That's a fancy way of saying you're *ancient.* But, hey, I guess now I know why you sleep so much in class! Old people sure do love their naps."

Izuku manages to dodge the next sugar packet that comes at him on instinct, and it instead hits Missy in the stomach, waking her up instantly.

"I'm not old," Aizawa mutters, but Izuku ignores him in favor of gasping dramatically.

"You hit Missy, you heathen! Apologize!"

The hero rolls his eyes. "She's fine, just look at her. She's enjoying the attention now."

Izuku looks back down at where he's now petting the feline fervently to soothe her. Missy looks content with life, and alright, she's *obviously* enjoying it, but so what? That's not gonna stop Izuku from dubbing Aizawa with his new title: the Missy-harasser.

Meatball waddles over and tries to consume the sugars whole, and Izuku quickly snatches both of the packets off the ground before a tragedy can occur. *Payback time.*

Even in the dim light, Izuku's aim is impeccable. With a flick of the wrist and the smallest hint of red lightning dancing across his arm,

both projectiles go hurling at the hero. One hits Aizawa in the neck and the other hits the man in the eye right as he opens it.

Aizawa curses and sits up a little to rub at the spots, and Izuku snickers.

“That's what you get for denying Missy’s supremacy,” he says triumphantly, only to have to eat his words not even a second later when said feline jumps to her paws and trots over to Aizawa, who mumbles a *detention, both of you,* under his breath. Missy springs onto his chest and curls up into a ball right there, easily falling back asleep.

And damn. Isn’t that just great?

Izuku ignores the Cheshire grin Aizawa flashes at him and goes back to his work, scowling now.

The two of them are traitors. They’re enemies of the state, now. Izuku won’t forget this betrayal. He’s going to write about it in his very exaggerated and inaccurate autobiography when he publishes it in the far future, mark his words.

They fall into a companionable silence, with the only sound being the occasional swishing of coffee from Aizawa when he moves to sip his beverage and the metal clinking from Izuku as he puts the toaster back together.

Izuku is suddenly reminded of a simpler time, back when none of this was even a thing, back when his home was still standing strong, back when Izuku was *alone.*

He’s always liked the quiet. At least when he’s the one controlling it—the one controlling the narrative. He likes the quiet because he can think without the fear of being judged or punished. He can mumble without being ridiculed. He can be *himself* in the silence, where there’s nobody else around.

Masks never have to be worn in those instances.

Aizawa is here this time, but he’s never made Izuku uncomfortable by his presence. At least not while he’s *just* Izuku; Rabbit is a different story for entirely obvious reasons.

And so this quiet, almost *domestic* scene is what gets Izuku to almost fully calm down and revert back to his normal self. His nearly

undetectable rambling becomes a little more prominent, his jaw and shoulders relaxing as he continues to work diligently for the next few minutes.

A multi-tasker by design, Izuku often needs to think about multiple things and events at once in order to fully occupy his brain. He can't let the silence get *too* loud, after all. He doesn't like that very much.

He tilts the toaster more into the light, a crease forming between his brows now. This is the point in his night where he would usually start to analyze his most recent patrol or record the details of a mission he had just completed—or even write more about new heroes and villains he finds interesting, but he can't do that now.

The times are changing.

He instead thinks back to Hawks, and about how Aizawa didn't hesitate for even a moment when choosing to place himself between the winged hero and Izuku.

How did he even get there so quickly? Izuku wonders. *And where would I be now if he hadn't?*

Hawks seems like a laid-back person, but he's still the number three hero. He's still an agent of the government, so if he felt the need to, Izuku knows Hawks would've had him immobilized and taken in faster than one could say *Plus Ultra.*

He could've done that at any time. Hell, he could *still* do that! Izuku isn't naive enough to think he'd be able to escape from the eyes of a predator like Hawks.

The young hero is a bird of prey. He will take what he wants when he wants, and not even All Might himself would probably be able to physically stop him from doing so—at least not before Hawks could inflict enough damage to be fatal.

So really, there's no telling what could've happened to Izuku without Aizawa's interruption.

The darker side of him is annoyed that he couldn't find out, while the more child-like part of himself, the smaller part, is forever indebted to his teacher and doesn't even want to entertain the idea of Aizawa not getting there in time.

But either way, Izuku is just so incurably *stupid.* Making dumb

mistakes like getting caught by a pro hero and letting himself get drugged? And not to mention almost *stealing* a girl's quirk?

He would've never gotten away with such foolish behavior before.

Izuku screws up his face, not liking where those particular thoughts are headed. He doesn't need that added stress right now.

The toaster is more important.

"Sensei?" He asks abruptly, the title slipping out before he can think better of it. He sees Aizawa glance at him out of the corner of his vision, and Izuku continues with haste lest the man decide to complain about the formality. He needs a distraction. "Why are you up so late?"

I asked Yamada the same thing that one night, but I don't think you'll have the same answer.

Aizawa sighs, hand running up and down Missy's spine, his movements gentle and slow. "Because I was working."

"On what?"

"A case."

The response is short and clipped, making Izuku turn away from his masterpiece to give the other an unimpressed look. "What kind of case?"

"The confidential kind," Aizawa says, a tinge of amusement in his voice.

"Aw, come on!" Izuku goes back to fiddling with the inserted panels on the toaster. "That's never stopped you before! Just tell me!"

A huff is all he gets in response, but then: "I'll think about it."

Izuku beams, happy that it's not a direct no. That's as close to a yes as he'll ever get from the man, he thinks.

I wonder if he'd say yes to me upgrading the other kitchen appliances and turning them into lightsabers. It would be a lot of fun.

Izuku's thoughts eventually flit back to that man from the club. The person he's now so eloquently dubbed as the *Mysterious Goatee Dude.*

Now, did he have a goatee? No. But does Izuku think he would look and sound more dramatic with one? Yes. So the name is going to stay.

The first pressing question is does Mystery Man know who Izuku is? He obviously knows about Rabbit, but there has to be something more there. Something more *personal.* More direct.

Who does this guy know? Who even *is* the guy, for one? He could honestly just be another random club member that Izuku is fixating on because of his growing paranoia, *or* he could be what the boy is leaning more towards: a bug.

A spy, in other words. Someone who doesn't quite belong at the Underground Club yet qualifies for it just with their title alone.

The Missing Goatee Bastard looked homeless, but not in the *I just rolled out from the sewers and got run over fourteen times* kind of homeless. More of the *I can't have a set place to call my own because it's too risky* kind of homeless.

Now, Izuku knows that one of the most valuable skills in espionage is the unteachable skill to belong anywhere. And what some don't understand is that in order to perfect this, you must first belong nowhere.

Which means the guy Izuku is 93.7% sure is an informant would fit the bill to a T. He would be perfect.

Izuku doesn't recall ever seeing him there before that moment, and he also doesn't recall his face popping up on any *Wanted* lists or criminal records. It's a new identity, it seems like.

So this guy must've indeed belonged nowhere before this, or he had just created a new persona for himself.

Even if Izuku just assumed he was correct in his predictions, the question would still remain: who is this Bastard Man working for, and *why* would he even bother going to a place like the Underground Club for what's probably mundane information?

There are just too many what-if's, too many variables that he can't bother guessing right now. Someone must have sent the dude and given him some background knowledge. How else would he have gotten in? He had to have been invited, that's for sure. So what—?

Ask him.

Izuku winces at the sudden voice, mentally beating it back down with a stick. No. He's not going to ask Aizawa. That's—that's stupid. That's just *asking* for a lecture.

There's no reason to assume Aizawa knows anything about the man Izuku came into contact with for literally less than ten seconds. He's still not even sure Aizawa knows about the *Club,* much less one random guy, so why take the risk?

You can't assume he doesn't *know anything.*

And that… that makes sense, actually. Why does that make sense? And why is Izuku so *stuck* on that guy?

He *has* to know. If things go downhill, well, he'll just have a lot of explaining to do. He could just lie through his teeth if need be, as hard as that is when it comes to Aizawa, but even then… What if he chooses not to lie? What if he actually decides to confide in him about the club?

His presence and position in the Underground Club is one of his most closely kept secrets from outsiders, next to his parentage and identity, of course. He could get into a lot of trouble if he made the Club's existence known to the general public.

Aizawa is different, though. He wouldn't tell, right? He's trustworthy. Izuku trusts him with his own life, however much he won't admit it, so he doesn't think the man would expose him like that.

He would *want* to know about the club—if he doesn't already, that is. He would want to know about a suspicious guy that may or may not be interested in Rabbit, or anyone else there for that matter.

Izuku scratches at a cheek with the miniature screwdriver Yamada had given him, fiddling with it for a moment. This is a bad idea. He's going to regret this. Why is he doing this again?

The boy takes a deep breath and decides to take the leap off the precipice. "Have you ever been to any clubs?"

His words come out rushed, nearly indistinguishable, and Izuku feels his heart drop when the pause stretches on for a bit too long. Aizawa cracks open an eye and peers at him out of the corner of his vision, expression never changing. He looks to have been trying to sleep. "I

have."

Is that a forced calm, or is he really just too tired to be suspicious?

"The fun ones or the not-so-fun ones?"

Aizawa moves his head so his cheek is pressed against the cushion and he can properly look at him, eyes narrowing slightly. "The ones that don't allow pipsqueaks like you within twenty feet of the entrance."

Izuku shoots him a glare. "You're not funny."

This gets a half-smile in return, and Aizawa reaches with his arm to set his coffee on the table before shifting onto his back, making sure to situate Missy as he does so. "Never said I was."

No, you're actually hilarious and you know it.

Izuku can't help but wonder why Aizawa's staying here and not going back to the office or his bedroom. He's sure he would've gone back had Izuku not been there to derail him. Or maybe he just regularly flops onto the couch in the middle of the night with a cup of fresh coffee.

"I've been to a lot of different ones, kid," the man continues, yawning. "Hizashi's responsible for most of that."

Seriously? Izuku's expression turns sour. He's a little annoyed now, even though it's dumb. "That's not a good answer," he mutters, as if it's Aizawa's fault he can't read minds and figure out what Izuku is really asking.

"Then make a better question."

Izuku pauses and takes a moment to study the hero. Aizawa isn't looking at him anymore. His eyes are closed and his face is turned towards the ceiling. He suddenly looks more like *Aizawa Shouta* than Izuku has ever seen him before, if that even makes any sense. He's not Eraserhead here—in his home, at this very moment, talking with Izuku.

He's… just Aizawa.

And this sudden realization makes the boy go through yet *another* identity crisis.

He can't be Rabbit here. The other night was proof of that. He doesn't

quite know how to be himself, so that's off the table as well. What choice does that leave him with? Who should he be right now?

The snarky vigilante or the orphaned teen? Is there even a difference anymore? Has there *ever* been a difference?

Izuku can't count how many versions of himself there are now. He can't count how many are left.

Of course you can't. The snide voice is back, whispering near his ear, sending cold shivers of dread up his spine. *How many you's have you been? After all this time? And how many of them have you killed?*

Sometimes he'll flip back and forth between Midoriya Izuku and Rabbit depending on the situation, but now that line is blurring together. He can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

And maybe that's a good thing.

Izuku decides to stay silent. He can't ask a more direct question without the risk of blowing everything. Aizawa appreciates bluntness, as he's a man of very little patience, but Izuku thinks that this time, just this once, it would be better to ease into the topic.

Even if it's only to make himself feel better.

He finishes securing the screen onto the toaster, doing some final touch-ups. It's a little blocky, he'll admit. Usually he would take the extra time and care to at least *make* his creations look high-tech and smooth, like something that's actually an upgrade rather than a downgrade, but he's working with limited supplies here.

Besides, the toaster looks better than it did before. It has a lot more functions to it. Maybe in the future Izuku can add in a voice to go with the AI. What it can do right now is allow the user to type in or say how long they want their food in there, and at what level they want the heat to be on.

It's simple, but Izuku likes it.

He sits back against the edge of the loveseat, grimacing. With this pretty much done, he doesn't know what to do. And when Izuku is left without something to do or something to work on, his mind tends to wander.

He hasn't used any of his invites for the Underground Club yet. He

doesn't do that often. See, every member gets a certain amount of invites at the beginning of every year, which allows them to invite a number of people of their choosing into the club, at any of their locations.

Most members—the *casual* members—have to run their invitees by the leaders of the club first before anything official is done. This is just to prevent any disastrous outcomes, of course. All it takes is one bad apple to spill the beans and get everyone arrested, after all.

But for the more active and influential members, the ones like Izuku, asking for permission before handing out an invite isn't necessary. There's a certain level of trust that Izuku, er, *Rabbit* has with the higher-ups, and this grants the boy a little bit of leeway.

So really, no one of importance will question his decisions. He gets hate, obviously, mostly for his age and personality, but Rabbit is still respected to some degree. His methods aren't always second-guessed.

But would this time be different? With what he's about to do?

His thoughts keep circling back to that question. He can't get it out of his head.

Wouldn't it be better to have someone else on his side? In his small corner? Aizawa is an underground hero. It would be allowed. He could help.

He's been helping me all this time, even from the very beginning. I don't think this would be any different.

Izuku gets a sudden burst of courage and grips the toaster with both hands, swallowing audibly. "Aizawa?" He doesn't wait for a reply. He *can't* wait for one. "What if I took you to a club I know?"

Silence. Not even an intake of breath or a noise of acknowledgement to tell Izuku that he was even heard.

"I know it sounds dumb!" Izuku continues, gesticulating wildly with the toaster to try and calm his nerves. "But it's not like it's a *real* club, so you can't get mad at me! I just wanted to know if maybe you've, ah, ever heard of it? It's pretty underground, so it's fine if you haven't! But then again you *are* an underground hero so maybe you *have* heard of it but you just haven't said anything about it yet, which would be kind of suspicious but also very likely. I honestly wouldn't put it past you to have already—"

The softest of snores cuts off his rambling, and the boy's head snaps up. Aizawa's eyes are closed, and his chest is rising ever so slowly as he breathes.

Oh. He's asleep.

Izuku sighs and turns his gaze back to the floor. Now that he's thinking about it, Erasure does feel lighter. Quirks tend to not feel as present when the users are sleeping or extremely tired.

"Welp," he shrugs. "I tried."

Now he can't get upset with me later for not at least trying to tell him about it. If he ever finds out on his own, that is.

Izuku gets up and pulls the blanket over his shoulders like a cape, picking up the coffee-filled mug and toaster as he heads for the kitchen. The dishwasher isn't done washing the latest load yet, so Izuku instead starts to wash out Aizawa's mug and places it upside-down on a towel to dry.

Now for the big reveal.

The boy sets the toaster in its rightful place and plugs it in, a little excited now. Almost immediately a soft blue light envelopes the kitchen and stretches over Izuku's skin. His face splits into a wide grin at the realization that it *works, holy shit, I didn't expect it to actually turn on,* and he does a little fist bump in the air.

He starts to play with the glowing touch screen and messes with the settings, just checking that all of the capabilities are there. Someone can now input their own personal timer and create presets for all of their cooking needs! Everyone has different preferences, so it would be helpful and quite simple to just have options someone could choose right from the get-go, especially if they're in a hurry.

It's not much, he knows, but the fact that it's working still makes him incredibly happy, even if it's not that useful.

The toaster isn't quite a full AI since it can't respond verbally just yet, so Izuku isn't going to give it an elaborate name or something that doubles as an acronym.

What about I name you Giichi? That sounds like a good title.

He'll find the materials to add a voice to it later on, but for now Izuku

is pretty proud of what he managed to do in such a short amount of time. His hands have been itching to get back to work on his projects. This is a step in the right direction.

But even as he starts to feel a bit hopeful for the future, the smile still slips off his face.

Compared to AINA, his latest project is merely insignificant. He misses the late AI. He misses her affection and voice, even though it was artificial. Even though he had *programmed* her to care for him and act like some sort of familial figure.

He misses her almost parental love, even if it was fake and simply a result of his extensive coding.

She may not have been real, but the joy Izuku would feel when hearing her voice in his otherwise lonely apartment definitely was.

The boy stares at the toaster from his place in the middle of the kitchen, the blue light of the screen illuminating his face in a soft glow, reflecting in his eyes.

It flickers off just a moment later, the words *good night, Izuku,* flashing over the black background.

The familiarity of it has Izuku wincing, and it's only then that he notices Pickles sitting on the counter right next to the toaster, awaiting pets with her tail flicking impatiently. The cat looks about as confused as Izuku feels.

He doesn't see the point of all this. Everything, he means.

Izuku is for sure going to be dead before he reaches thirty. He knows that much, at least. The club doctor said that if he doesn't fix this situation soon, his life on earth will be snatched from him. His subscription will essentially be canceled.

Anywhere between 1-30 years, the doc estimated. A very broad range, all things considered, but Izuku guesses that quirk matters are always quite unpredictable.

Even now, weeks after learning his future and coming to terms with it all, it still doesn't seem real.

And maybe that's why Izuku tries not to think of it much. It's not like he can do anything about it. There's no choice for him. Not now, at

least.

Between revealing it all and staying quiet, Izuku knows what he has to choose. It's the most logical answer. What he *wants* to choose doesn't matter.

He could either let everything go and finally give in and *tell* someone, or he could just die.

One sounds more relieving than the other.

Izuku snorts, sucking in a sharp breath and killing yet another part of himself in the silence that follows.

Now that he's thinking about it, isn't it ironic? How the one thing he needs the most is the one thing his father has the most of? Time is indeed a fickle thing.

He sighs and lets Pickles climb onto his shoulder as he walks back to the living room. He cleans up his mess on the floor and sets all the parts on the coffee table as quietly as he can. He'll have to put everything away in the morning when he can see better.

Izuku pauses just before he's about to head back to the guest room. He turns back to look at the lump that's still lying on the couch.

Aizawa looks dead when he's asleep.

It's almost unsettling, especially with how the man barely makes a sound or shifts even the tiniest bit—he's as still as a rock.

He doesn't grumble or talk to himself or anything; he just *sleeps.*

And this is normal for an underground hero, Izuku supposes. People who specialize in stealth have to always be quiet and alert, even in sleep. Any noise at all could attract the wrong sort of attention.

So that part makes sense. The only issue is that Aizawa is on his right side and facing away from the couch, leaving his heart incredibly exposed and vulnerable. It's not something Izuku would expect from him, so the change has him frowning. The best position for sleep is on your left side, where you're curled up into a ball and preferably keeping your back facing the enemy so any weapons or projectiles have a harder time piercing major organs.

But this is Aizawa's home, so in all senses he *should* feel comfortable

enough to not have to do that, so why is Izuku so stuck on it? And why does the man barely look like he's *breathing?*

Izuku can feel the faintest stir of Erasure under Aizawa's skin, and logically he knows he's alive, but it's just hard not to check. Because what if he's wrong? What if this is the first time *Extract* is ever wrong?

There's a first for everything.

Before he can think better of it, Izuku takes a few tentative steps forward and pokes his cheek. His hand withdraws quickly, but Aizawa just grunts before twisting a little to faceplant into the cushions.

Not dead, at least.

Izuku unwraps the All Might blanket from around his shoulders and carefully throws it over the hero, not wanting him to get cold. He doesn't quite know why, but he ends up making himself comfortable on the loveseat when he's done instead of just going back to the guest room.

His eyes drift back to the kitchen and settle on the paper that's now permanently hanging up near the top of the fridge.

House Rules!! (^ □ω□ ^ ❁)

Rule #4 is to take care of yourself, right? Is sleeping included in that? Yamada was adamant about how self-care is very important, so will he be upset if Izuku doesn't sleep?

It's not like he's planning on staying up tonight, but still. He'll have to test that out soon so he knows for the future.

Documenting all the variables and testing all possible outcomes is an important step in any experiment.

Izuku hasn't really done anything physical today, but that doesn't stop his muscles from being sore and his back from aching. Which reminds him that he *really* wants to go back to training with All Might. It feels like he hasn't seen the man in *forever.* Tsukauchi, too.

School starts back up for him tomorrow for the first time since his apartment blew up. He doesn't think he's ready for it, in all honesty. He may be anxious to get out of this house for a little while, but he's still hesitant all the same.

He doesn't think he'll ever be ready for whatever might be in store for him next. Something big is going to happen. He can *feel* it.

Izuku lets the quiet hum of the air conditioner serve as a white noise as he sinks further into the cushioned chair, Meatball jumping up to join him and Pickles. His senses aren't as sharp anymore for some reason. They haven't been since Aizawa started talking to him, in fact.

Something that Izuku will theorize about come morning time, no doubt. That's definitely a question for the book.

Perhaps it was just a coincidence, or perhaps it wasn't. Either way, It's going to give him something interesting to do, so it's worth checking out.

For now, though, he's just going to try and rest as much as he can. He's going to need it.

And if, a few hours later, Izuku nearly stirs awake to the feeling of that same warm blanket being draped back over him, well, nobody has to know.

Chapter End Notes

> little lion boy. addicted to a game you've lost countless of times. you should know that hope is just another poison of choice
>
> was listening to this song on youtube while writing this chap :) have any song recs? I'd love to hear them □👉👈
>
> (also LMAO sorry for being so late again! school sucks ass and I've been working on a few other fics!! but I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who's stuck with this so far □❤□ I appreciate all of you and I love all of your comments!! you guys are so kind 🥺)
>
> and not us hitting over 300k words 👀👀
>
> ,

mouthful of forevers

Chapter Notes

> AHHH!! LOOK AT THIS AMAZING ANIMATIC ON YOUTUBE!!! The details are so GOOD AHHhH!! And the transition near the end?? IMMACULATE!! This is by booyahbaby on the server sdjkfghfsg I love it so much! this must've taken forever 😩 it's so good!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of the biggest differences between this apartment and the old apartment is that Izuku doesn't have to worry about falling through the floor anymore.

His teachers' place is fairly new and sturdy, with reinforced walls and floors that don't creak or groan dangerously when you walk on them. It's an interesting thing to get used to, as Izuku forgot what it was like to not have to worry about those things after living in his crumbling building for so many years. Now, that's not to say Izuku's home was trash or anything, of course not! It's just that Izuku can do things here that he wouldn't have even dreamed of doing in his own apartment.

Here, Izuku can quite literally bounce off the walls and ceiling without running the risk of flying through like it's wet paper.

He knows this because he's *doing* it right now.

Izuku's not even using One for All for this, but he might as well be with how fast he's going. He's a blur of color as he soars over the couch with each jump using *Boost,* the wind he's creating making Meatball and Pickles run for cover.

He wishes he had more room to work off the energy, but Izuku's still grateful that he's being allowed to do this at all. Well, maybe not *allowed.* Aizawa would've put a stop to the ruckus earlier had Yamada not cut him off and encouraged the boy to continue his exercise, going on to praise Izuku for his speed and strength. Except Izuku didn't miss the sharp glare Yamada turned upon his husband to stop him from complaining, so yeah, he wouldn't exactly say he was *allowed.* It's just that they're not stopping him.

While Izuku doesn't exactly like pitting the two teachers against each other, he's also not going to prevent a light disagreement from

happening if he gets to do stuff like this. This is fun. And besides, he's so nervous right now that he has to have *something* to do or else he's going to explode.

After a moment's pause, spent with Izuku moving the lamp on the end table a few inches to the left so he won't crash into it, he's back at it again. He goes from one side to the next in a split second, keeping track of where exactly he lands so he won't hit the same spot twice. The walls may be sturdy and thick, but he doesn't want to take too many chances here.

One, two, three, four.

Izuku switches up after four seconds, now bouncing between the floor and ceiling. His head is spinning with all the rapid turns he's doing, but that doesn't deter him. It just spurs him on even further. *Man, I really hope their neighbors can't hear me stomping like this. They're gonna hate me.*

After five minutes of this, Izuku allows himself to land on the ground for a final time and starts to sprint in a circle around the living room. Most of the cats are sitting on their pedestals near the right wall and watching him, either amused or perplexed by the display. Missy is the only one unaccounted for, but Izuku is willing to bet a thousand yen she's in the kitchen with Yamada, probably trying to guilt trip the man into giving her more food.

Meatball is surprisingly not the one doing that this time, as the feline is busy watching Izuku. It seems the boy is very entertaining to those that aren't already used to his antics.

He's on his fiftieth lap when *Boost* fizzles out suddenly, causing Izuku to trip over air and fall flat on his face.

"Calm down, Midoriya." Aizawa's eyes are glinting the faintest red when Izuku cranes his neck up to glare at him. "We're leaving in a minute, be patient."

Izuku just grits his teeth and flips onto his back, using the soles of his feet to continue pushing himself around the couch. Missy trots out of the kitchen and hops onto his stomach, using him as a moving throne as Izuku hits his fifty-first lap. He feels Erasure let up and immediately starts to use *Boost* again for added speed, leaving a smoke trail behind him as his shirt slides against the carpet. Eventually it becomes so hot that Izuku has to pause so it can cool down, and after ten seconds he starts up again.

As much as he wants to start a fire through friction, it probably wouldn't end well for him.

Izuku sees Aizawa rub a hand down his face and sigh heavily before taking another sip of his coffee. He's sitting at the dining table and looking full of regret. "Didn't think I'd see a kid so excited to go to school," he mutters.

The boy sits up straight and narrows his eyes at him, but Yamada cuts in before he can defend himself. "Well, 'sides little Tenya, of course."

Another bout of impatience hits the vigilante, and he scoops Missy into his arms just before he jumps to his feet. "Come on! You're both being slow! If we don't move now we're gonna be *late."*

Aizawa snorts and points to one of the seats at the table, shaking his head. "We're already getting there two hours before the bell, kid. We can't be late to being early. And sit down; breakfast is almost done."

It takes less than ten seconds for Izuku to inhale the entire plate when Yamada brings the food over, and then he's up and running again, this time to put on his shoes.

"At least he's eating everything we give him now," he hears Yamada whisper. Aizawa downs the rest of his coffee like a shot in reply.

Izuku is going to *steal* that fu—that coffee maker and turn it into a flamethrower one day, mark his words. The only downside to that is he wouldn't have coffee for himself. Just fire.

A pretty good trade-off, all things considering.

Not even five minutes later the green-haired boy is throwing open the front door with a wide grin, excited at the prospect of freedom—only for Aizawa to shut it quickly before he can even make it one step out of the doorway.

"Not yet." He takes his capture weapon off the hook on the wall and lifts a brow when Izuku lets himself drop to the floor in exasperation. "This is your first day back, so there are some rules we have to discuss."

Are you kidding me? More rules?

"No, I'm not kidding you. And just listen to me for a minute. This is important."

Izuku wrinkles his nose but doesn't interject, instead starting a silent counter in his head for one minute.

"Your classmates are going to be curious about why you've been gone for a week. That's only natural." Aizawa shrugs on his scarf and glances at Yamada, who's busy doing last minute fixes to his hair using the gel on the coffee table. He looks focused on his work, but Izuku knows he's listening. "Hizashi didn't reveal much, so they're bound to get even nosier once they see you back. Some are going to press you for answers and become general annoyances, so that being said."

His gaze is even when he turns back, the seriousness in his eyes garnering Izuku's full attention.

"It's up to you to decide what you want to tell your friends. Revealing the whole truth about your past situation might be dangerous, both for you and for them, but I'm not going to stand here and say you can't do that, alright? While I don't think you'd want to do something like that anyway, it's still worth noting."

Izuku's brows furrow a little. *They don't care if I tell them or not? They're okay with it?* He has to admit, he didn't really expect that one. See, he's not stupid. He wasn't planning on telling his classmates *anything* about the bombing or his current place of stay, as that would be a *very* uncomfortable conversation. Kacchan is the only one who already knows about everything, and that's because of that phone call Izuku made to him a couple days prior.

Like Aizawa said, revealing something like that would be a recipe for disaster, so Izuku never imagined that the hero would give him the go ahead on possibly telling the rest of his classmates. He doesn't even want to, but it's strangely nice to have that choice.

Because that means the two teachers wouldn't be embarrassed about people knowing Izuku is staying with them for the time being. It's like they truly wouldn't mind at all.

I thought they would've tried to keep it as quiet as possible.

Aizawa's face darkens, bringing Izuku back out of his thoughts. "Regardless of what you choose to do, they still have to respect their classmate's privacy. If they start to be intrusive or won't stop asking questions about why you were gone, come get one of us. You're not obligated to tell them anything you don't want to, so don't feel pressured."

Don't feel pressured. You're not *obligated.* Izuku frowns to himself at the wording and shifts on his feet. Since he's not going to tell the whole truth, what *is* he going to tell his classmates? His *friends?* They deserve to know *something.* That's the bare minimum, right? And also…

"What are *you* going to tell them? You were gone for a week, too, and you *never* skip work."

Aizawa lifts a shoulder in a halfhearted shrug, going back to watching Yamada finish his morning routine. "I've been saving up vacation days. If anyone asks, I just needed a break from you hellions." A tilt of the head. "Which isn't untrue."

The boy rolls his eyes and thunks his head against the door when he gets up.

The truth is, he's nervous for today. He's only pushing them to get going so he can rip it off like a bandaid. Izuku's mind is stuck in this sort of waiting mode, where he can't get anything done or function properly until the cause of his stress and anxiety has been dealt with. Or until he's distracted.

God, could they be any more slow?

"And kid, I want you to stay by us until we actually get on campus." Aizawa must see the look on Izuku's face after he says this, as he continues before the boy can cut in. "We have to take extra precautions right now. People hated you enough to blow up your whole *building,* and some of them even knew your identity. There's no telling if there are others out there who are willing to do something similar to you with the same information, if not something worse."

Now, if Izuku's being honest, that part holds some truth. Which is why he's even *more* annoyed all of a sudden. Yeah, sure, he's in danger. But he's *always* in danger! As Rabbit *and* as plain old Midoriya Izuku! He can't spend the rest of his days in a bubble. That's just not how life works! Especially not *his* life.

The people who came after me are outliers anyway, he thinks. He's pretty sure Daddy Dearest is the one who sent them, which is the only way they could have known his identity. They didn't leak it or share it with the public because they were probably either paid or threatened to keep quiet about it. Maybe even both.

The chances of something like that happening again, so soon after the

explosion? It's slim. Izuku knows a storm is coming, but it won't happen as random or as sporadic as the hero in front of him seems to think.

Attacking in broad daylight isn't really his style anyway.

Yamada picks up his work bag and flashes Izuku a comforting smile, seeming to sense his growing frustration. "I know this all feels like too much, but it really is just to keep you safe. So don't go running off just yet, yeah? Not until we're inside the gates."

Despite his mind screaming at him to object, to say that he's not a *child* who needs to be watched so closely, Izuku grits his teeth and nods once. He's not going to argue with Yamada just yet.

Pick your battles.

The voice hero starts to search for the car keys after giving Izuku a hair ruffle, and Aizawa turns back to the boy—who's still dazed over the brief contact—with narrowed eyes.

"One last thing."

He holds out his hand, and Izuku stares.

Huh?

Izuku immediately prepares to make a crude joke to fill the silence but quickly thinks better of it. What does the man want from him? A handshake? Is this a weird secret code that Izuku is supposed to know or something?

Shit, did he see me steal that piece of gum from his wallet this morning? Just as Izuku's about to dig in his pockets for the spearmint gum to put in the man's palm, Aizawa continues. "That knife in your left shoe. Give it here." He keeps his hand up and just shakes his head when Izuku sputters. "Don't look so surprised. You're not as slick as you think, kid. Listen. I know it's easy to forget, but having undocumented weapons on campus is against school rules. It's also very *illegal.* So hand it over, please."

He's not asking. That much is obvious. What *isn't* obvious, however, is how he knew Izuku had it in the first place. While Yamada and Aizawa were both finishing up breakfast, Izuku went into the kitchen to fill up one of the cats' water bowls—and also to snag a knife. From where both heroes were sitting, they shouldn't have been able to see

him stick it in the bottom of his ratty old shoe.

Not unless they secretly have x-ray vision. He wouldn't put it past Aizawa to have something like that.

Izuku curls his hands into fists and opens his mouth to argue. This is his *safety* knife. The *what-if* knife. It's not the same as his old one, the one that had his Rabbit initials carved into it, but it's still a knife.

It still takes off the edge of panic that's always settling at the bottom of his stomach nowadays.

That's not fair, he wants to say. *You carry your huge knife around all the time. What's the difference?* Izuku has to bite his tongue to keep from voicing this. It would be a weak argument anyway. Aizawa is a pro hero whose actions and weapons are legally backed and protected by the law; Izuku is a vigilante (can he still call himself that?) who is wanted in many countries despite not ever having left Japan before. He's also an underage student who, for the safety and reputation of UA, cannot be seen with dangerous items.

Even if that *dangerous item* is just a simple kitchen knife.

Izuku throws a hesitant glance at Yamada, brows furrowing when he realizes the man is looking at him expectantly, almost like he's prompting him.

Fuck. And here Izuku was thinking he could go to Yamada for backup for this particular argument.

The boy takes the knife out of his shoe with a barely suppressed huff, eyes boring holes into the ground as Aizawa takes it from him and goes to deposit it in the kitchen sink. This is *unfair.* They keep saying he's in danger and needs to be protected, and yet they won't let him have stuff that'll help Izuku defend himself better.

Izuku tips his head when Aizawa nudges him to the side so he can finally, *finally* open the door. "If I can't take my knife, can I at least take Missy?"

Yamada laughs behind him, and Aizawa shoves the boy through the doorway in response.

Yeah. Guess that one's a no.

Aizawa is the one to get into the driver's seat, surprisingly enough,

and it's this action that has Izuku freaking out even more.

The clock is ticking. Izuku can hear it echoing in his bones. He can feel his fingers twitching with each movement of the imaginary clock in his head. He wants—no, *needs* to start moving around again.

His hands are aching again. They've been trembling ever so slightly ever since this morning, and no matter what he does, the boy just can't seem to get it to go away. It just comes and goes as surely as the sun and moon every day, and honestly? It kind of scares him.

Izuku twists his neck to look out of the car window. The clouds above are dark with the promise of rain, and he can't even be mad about it. *Rain is nice,* he tells himself. *Rain can be comforting.*

He's so busy trying to calm down and *not* psych himself out that he doesn't even realize they're at UA until the car comes to a halt in the teacher's parking lot.

The keys aren't even out of the ignition yet before Izuku is throwing open the door and bolting. They're at the back of the school; Izuku can see the archways of what must be the staff's entrance up ahead.

There's a chill in the air and a light mist that hovers over the grass surrounding the campus. It smells like it was recently cut.

His palm itches again and he ignores it, instead focusing on the stretch of trees less than fifty yards away. He needs to get rid of that heavy feeling that's weighing inside his chest now, and if he can just break through that line of birch trees ahead of him, maybe the ache will go away and he'll be distracted from—

Izuku nearly chokes when someone snags his collar and yanks him back. He twists to glare accusingly at the man holding him.

"What did I say earlier?" Aizawa asks tiredly, but his face is still stern when he meets Izuku's gaze.

How the hell did you catch up to me so quickly? Are you even out of breath?

Izuku huffs in frustration and tries to wriggle out of the grip. "I wasn't gonna run!"

"I don't care. Stick beside me."

And with that, the hand releases him from the death prison. Izuku bites back a snark reply and grits his teeth, willing himself to keep his mouth shut for the second time that day. *Not yet. Be good. You're not actually angry at him.*

It feels easier to be upset at other people, though. That's the hard part.

Izuku moves to walk beside Yamada just to spite the other hero, deciding to ignore the black-haired man entirely. He looks off to the side as they walk the distance from the parking lot to the gate, gaze lingering on the trees and thick greenery to his left. It could provide for good cover if he ever needed it.

And even here, at UA High School, Izuku can still feel eyes on him.

Logically, he knows they're not actually there. He can't sense any quirks buzzing around besides the heroes' next to him and a couple inside UA, so they should be fine. But it's just the *idea* of what could be there.

If you expect it, why shouldn't it already be there?

His gaze shifts to the side and he sees Aizawa doing the exact same thing: watching the surroundings, eyes sharp and alert.

He looks almost as paranoid as Izuku is.

The boy shivers and inches a little closer to Yamada, telling himself it's only because of how cold it's getting. It's spooky when there's not many other people around.

Aizawa has to use his own ID to allow Izuku through the gates, and the moment the light blinks green to signify the action being approved, Izuku is off like a light once again.

He's in the walls now, so technically he's not breaking his word. He might as well be inside UA itself since he's on campus grounds.

Izuku hears Aizawa yell something at him but pays it no mind. He doesn't need to be reminded that he has to go see Recovery Girl. He's not *stupid,* thank you. Aizawa will know if he skipped out on it, so there would be no point.

That doesn't mean he can't put it off for a few minutes, though.

UA is almost eerily quiet when it's empty. Izuku scrunches up his face when he finally makes it inside and starts to wander the halls. It's still a little dark, as it is pretty early in the morning, so everything is just that much scarier.

The halls feel damp in a way that has Izuku's ears tingling, the silence pressing in on his temples. It's a weird feeling, really. Almost familiar.

It makes Izuku think of leaky faucets and cobwebs in the corners of red rooms.

His feet carry him to the outside of Recovery Girl's office, and he hesitates once he's about to knock on the door, one hand still hovering over the metal. She's in there, of course. But should he really bother her? He feels fine. He *knows* he's fine.

Izuku shakes himself free of these thoughts and raps on the door a few times, taking a deep breath in when she calls for him to come inside. The sharp scent of antiseptic hits his nostrils the moment he walks through the door, and *yeah,* the fact that it smells just like that stupid hospital definitely isn't helping to quell his worries.

It smells like regret and fear and—is that coffee? Izuku walks a little further into the office, briefly debating whether or not he should ask where the coffee machine is. He may not like doctors, but they could *potentially* bribe him with his favorite drink. He'd allow it.

"Good morning, dearie." Recovery Girl hobbles out of her mini office and points with her cane at the bed pushed against the wall. "You take a seat right there and I'll be right over."

Hm. That coffee smell is coming from that room. She must have it stored in there. Would she notice if Izuku just walked right in there while she was distracted? If it's a coffee maker, Izuku could just shove it up into the vents and come back for it later. Hopefully there aren't any cameras. He can just take the machine and somehow lug it back to the apartment so he can hide it in his room. He could then make improvements to it and—

Izuku squawks when Recovery Girl's cane knocks into his leg, and the boy shoots her a dark look from his place on the edge of the bed. The healer is sporting her usual attire, but this time she has her salt and pepper hair down to her shoulders. "Hey, what was that for!"

She just *hmphs* and jumps up onto her rolling chair. "Looks like you've still got the feeling in your legs, so that's not a problem."

Wha—? Why would that be a problem in the first place?

The healer must see the look on his face, as she rolls closer to him to poke his knee. “Don’t go forgetting how you almost lost both your legs, sonny. If you had been under those rocks any longer, things would’ve been much worse for you.”

Izuku doesn’t think he can ever forget how it felt to be pinned under that huge slab of concrete, but he doesn’t say this. He didn’t think he was that close to losing his legs, though. He was more worried about other things at the time.

“I had to do extensive healing on them, you know, and even with the help of a few others I was afraid it wouldn’t be enough to protect you from permanent nerve damage.” She taps his other leg with the cane, too, this time near his ankle. “It could’ve worsened over time, so I had to see for myself, but I’m happy to see that everything is in working order. No numbness or tingling besides the usual sort, right?”

What’s the usual sort?

Recovery Girl hums in satisfaction when he just shakes his head. “I see. That’s very good. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: you’re very lucky to have made it out of there with minimal injuries. This outcome is the best we all could’ve hoped for.”

No. The best outcome would’ve been something much, much different than this. Izuku didn’t think he would make it this far.

He never planned on it.

The hero continues to check over him, asking him to do basic stretches and exercises so she can see if there’s any stiffness, and she merely tuts when she sees the small scratches on his arm from when Missy got a little too bloodthirsty this morning. They’re already healing, so it’s not a big deal, but that doesn’t stop Recovery Girl from giving him the stink eye.

After taking a look at the faint scarring on his abdomen due to the pipe that shish kebabed him, she pulls away from Izuku with an affirmative nod. “You’re fine, just as I suspected, but it’d still do you good to continue taking it slow. That means no bouncing off walls, you hear?”

Izuku, who would never do something like that, gives her a serious nod.

“Despite what you may want everyone to think, your body is still healing itself and its older wounds, so you’re going to start feeling sick here in the upcoming days as a result of your body trying to adapt; I already have some medicine prepared that’s suited to your needs if things get to be too unbearable. But other than that, you should be alright. As I said, just make sure to take it easy. This won’t be for much longer.”

That’s what everyone’s been saying, he thinks in slight frustration, hands fisting the fabric of his pants, *and yet nothing’s changed at all.*

Izuku dips his head at her and makes to leave after promising to not do anything reckless, but she holds up her cane to block him right as he slides off the bed.

“Sit back down, boy, I’m not finished yet.” She barely waits for him to obey before continuing. “Your hand. Hold it out for me.”

Her gloves feel weird against Izuku’s skin, and he focuses on the latex feeling as she carefully inspects his palm and fingers. He has a feeling he knows what she’s looking at.

“How long has it been trembling like this?” She asks, not looking up yet.

That’s… not even close.

“Just, ah, since the explosion, I think?” He pulls away, suddenly remembering that he’s not really supposed to be truthful to doctors. He can’t have her asking too many questions. “But it’s not always like this! It only started getting worse last night. Usually it’s not that bad.”

“Hm. You should’ve told one of your teachers this when it started happening, boy.” She leans forward to kiss his forearm, a soft green light wreathing around his fingers and wrist in response. The second is done right after. “That’s not going to help much, but it should make it easier to deal with. The doctors did say you might have some issues with your hands for a few weeks, and maybe even some aching in your wrists. Remember that you took the first explosion in your front, so your hands got the brunt of it all. How you didn’t lose them entirely, along with your legs, is just another mystery no one can figure out.”

To be fair, the first explosion was arguably the weakest out of all of them. Izuku is pretty sure it was only supposed to shock him, not hurt him terribly. If they were ordered to kill him immediately or at least

make sure some of his limbs didn't make it out, he wouldn't have been able to stop any of that from happening.

"Have you told All Might yet?"

Izuku breaks out of his stupor at the random question, heart rate picking up at the mere mention of his mentor's name. He knows just from the suspicious look on her face that she's not talking about his hands anymore.

This is exactly what he didn't want to happen today.

He chews on his inner cheek and glances out the window. The storm is rolling in now; he can feel his bones rattling with the distant thunder.

"I… I haven't gotten a chance to see him yet, so, uh, he doesn't know about my blood. I couldn't tell him."

What if he just blames himself for it? She thinks it has something to do with One for All even though I told her it doesn't. He might get upset about it if she tells him that.

"You couldn't tell him, or you just didn't want to?"

Izuku can't suppress the full body flinch that overtakes him. Why does Recovery Girl have to be so intelligent? "Both," he mumbles, and it's not really a lie.

Physically, he had many chances to tell All Might this. Even before he was gifted his new phone, he could've asked Aizawa or Yamada to borrow their own devices, as mortifying as that would be. He has All Might's number memorized, so he could've just texted or called him.

He just didn't *want* to. He was too scared that All Might would react badly. Still is scared, in fact.

"See to it that you do that, child. I gave you two weeks. Remember what I said." She fixes him with a look and points her cane threateningly. "I have no qualms about doing it myself."

Izuku stops himself from whining that patient confidentiality must be respected even outside of legal medical practice, as he's sure Recovery Girl would just come up with some law to counter his argument, so he instead hops off the bed to leave, taking the shiny All Might sticker she holds out to him without complaint.

He can stick that on the underside of Aizawa's desk later just to piss him off. It would be the ultimate prank.

The dark haired hero is waiting outside the office with Izuku's new uniform in hand when the boy walks out, and he hands it to him with a skeptical look. "There's still around two hours before school starts. We're one of the few here at the moment, so you've got time to get yourself situated. Just make sure you put that on before the bell."

God, Izuku can't fucking wait to destroy this uniform too.

Aizawa stoops down to his level with a sigh, as if sensing his desire for destruction, and the sudden intensity on his face has Izuku wanting to take a step back, but he refrains from doing so at the last moment, cold shock filling his veins.

The hero's gaze lingers on the thin white scar on Izuku's jaw before moving up to bore into his eyes, and *oh.* This is a show of trust, he realizes. Aizawa is showing it so *openly*.

Why is he doing this right now? What's the reason?

"We have a new backpack for you and some supplies already at your desk, so don't worry about that. Your old notes for all your subjects are gone, but I don't think it'll be much of a problem for you with that brain of yours. Now, I need to go get some stuff taken care of since I've been gone for a week. Nezu wants me in a meeting in five minutes." He reaches forward to flick his forehead with a finger. "You still have to stay in this building. No going outside the gates. There's always a possibility someone could be watching."

Warmth blooms in Izuku's chest at the words, and it quickly spreads to his face and ears. This is almost suspiciously considerate. While it's nice that Aizawa cares *(holy fucking shit he's really serious about that, huh?)*, who does he think is watching him? He said there could still be more mercenaries out there who know his identity, but Izuku doubts that. Now, he has many other enemies who would love to get a chance to grab him, but most of them don't know Rabbit's identity either—so, again, this is all still very pointless.

What they should be setting their sights on instead is something much larger. His father is always watching, just not physically, so keeping Izuku contained in a small area again would be kind of pointless seeing as All for One would probably be able to find him here anyway if he truly wanted to. Another scheme by his father doesn't seem too improbable, so it would be wiser to *prepare* for a large-scale fight

rather than to try and prevent the inevitable from happening.

Izuku would know, as he's been trying to run from that stuff all his life. He should still be running now, but not to stop the fight—to try and save the people he cares about before it gets here.

Aizawa is being paranoid over the wrong thing, and it's annoying Izuku, but he can't get too upset about it. If he would just tell them what they really have to worry about, like Izuku's appetite on Taco Tuesday, for example, they wouldn't be doing this. But that, among other things, would mean having to admit and reveal things that Izuku would really rather not. That would put everyone in even *more* danger.

So for now he'll have to settle for another almost-prison.

Izuku sours his expression and huffs even as he agrees to not leave the building. While he was definitely planning to roll in the outside garden UA tries to hide and track all the mud back inside Aizawa's classroom, he can settle for staying indoors. There's still plenty of shit he can get into here.

Like, for example, the vents. It's like a necessity for him to get up high and to be hidden away whenever possible. A good way to spot a possible Imposter Izuku is to ask them what the first thing the real Izuku would do upon entering a new facility is, and the answer better be something along the lines of exploring the ceiling. If it's not, well, any witnesses around had better become cool about a few things really quickly, because a murder will have to take place.

Aizawa is barely all the way down the hall before Izuku is using the wall to his left to spring up towards the vent hatch, and he grabs onto it with a manic grin tugging at his lips.

He could get high off the feeling he gets from doing this… which is probably why Kacchan kept telling him he should accept those free counseling sessions that were offered at the homeless shelter a few blocks away from his house.

Now, what's *not* making Izuku happy is the nest he stumbles upon that's tucked into the corner of two intersecting pathways. It's the same nest he saw the last time he wanted to roll around in the vents, but this time it's even bigger! There are more fluffy pillows and woollen blankets, and it looks like even a miniature couch has been added off to the side.

The most interesting thing about the nest, however, is the chess set that sits off to the side. It looks like it didn't move from the last time Izuku saw it, but as he comes closer, the boy notices that a piece has been moved forward.

Just a singular white pawn. It almost feels like an invitation.

Without thinking too much about it, Izuku crawls over and pushes one of the black pawns forward in response before moving past the area entirely.

He prefers checkers, but he guesses this game will have to do.

How fast can you go in the vents? a voice asks him as he goes around another corner.

"Faster than your mo—" Izuku breaks off in a flurry of coughs as dust goes up his nose. Okay, maybe he deserved that.

Wait, how fast *can* he go? These vents are pretty big, so he has room to work with, but he'd still have to crawl. If he uses One for All in the balls of his feet to give himself an extra push, maybe he can go even faster than he thinks. But what if he doesn't have enough room to stop or slow down? He might go right through one of the vent walls and get hurt.

Which sounds a little enticing.

Izuku lets the familiar warmth of All Might's quirk spread through his veins and body, from his ears down to the tips of his toes. He keeps the input at a steady five percent, just letting himself get used to crawling on his hands and knees with the extra energy. There are no sparks yet, and he's glad. How interesting would it be for a random teacher at this hour to see flashes of light coming from above them? He really would be a god then.

Pretty soon he's barreling through the vents at a pace that should probably be illegal, given that he must sound like a terrifying critter scuttling about right now. It's dark, so it's a little hard to see where he's going with how fast he's moving, but he manages.

Fuck yeah. I'm amazing. I'm like Keanu Reeves in this place. Can your favorite hero do this? Didn't think so.

Everything is going great until he has to round a sharp corner. He tries to slow down, but there's something wet on the bottom of the vents,

causing the space before him to turn into a sort of *slip n' slide.*

One for All flickers out immediately in a panic as Izuku twists his body to the side. He falls and scrabbles for some kind of purchase, but the momentum keeps him going.

Shit.

He crashes into the vent wall, only just having enough time to move his hands in front of him to take some of the force. Which is, fortunately for him, the *worst* thing Izuku could have done!

He lies there, cradling his abused hands to his chest. It's almost like he can already hear Recovery Girl's oncoming lecture. He hates how she was absolutely right.

Keanu Grieves, he thinks sadly, rubbing his knees and forehead when the aching in his hands stops bothering him as much.

Well. At least he answered the question. He can go *incredibly* fast in the vents.

Strips of light hit his face, and Izuku moves his chin a little to study the room down below him. From what he can see through the little airways, it looks like a storage closet. There are boxes and containers full of varying supplies stacked around the room, and Izuku scooches closer to get a better look.

He wonders what kind of goodies he could find if he dropped in and searched through some of the boxes. Would someone find out? Would they be angry with him?

He's pretty sure this is just a storage closet, so no one should get too mad. But it does look important, and also very high-tech. He can spot some of the weapons peeking out of the towering containers.

But what really catches his eye are the boxes labeled *permanent spray paint: do not use!!* pushed away into the far side of the room.

It's the last three words that get him going; the hidden challenge in it.

He very carefully opens the vent hatch and drops into the center of the room, his eyes going wide with the same excitement a child would have in a candy shop. He steps toward the boxes, trying to suppress those inner desires of his.

Izuku thinks of chipped chess pieces and small nests resting in too-clean vents. He thinks of Aizawa's annoying face, of white paws much more involved in things than Izuku would like them to be.

Oh, god. He shouldn't. He really should not be doing this. This will get him into trouble. Nothing good can possibly come from what he's thinking about doing. Absolutely nothing.

He shouldn't do this. But he will.

It'll always be the thrill that keeps him alive.

Shit, shit, shit!

Toshinori didn't do his paperwork over the weekend, and nor did he finish grading his classes' last few assignments. Dammit.

He had plenty of time to do them, he just *didn't.* His mind was too occupied with other things.

When was the last time he ever felt this stressed? Toshinori can't remember. Even when it comes to hero work, he's usually not this busy or overwhelmed. At Might Tower, there are almost always assistants and secretaries that Toshinori can rely on for help with scheduling and signing legal stuff. He admittedly never has to do a lot of work there with them around.

But here? At his old school? He's a teacher (somehow), which means he has to do all of this planning on his own—and everything is that much worse seeing as he truly doesn't know how to be a teacher. He's flying by the seat of his pants and just trying to copy what he sees his coworkers doing.

That's not to say Toshinori is dumb or incapable, not at all. It's just that this particular area is not his strong suit. In the few weeks he's been teaching? All of his students almost died under his watch while he had to fight some crazed monster on their field trip on the third day of school.

Which is, yeah, not the best reassurance a new teacher could have, huh?

Toshinori walks quicker through the halls, shivering. He'll barely have enough time to complete all of his paperwork before the bell rings, saying as most of his morning was taken up by the meeting Nezu wanted him to attend with the others.

He doesn't have nearly enough time anymore. Even his time limit is decreasing by the day, and with it goes his strength. He's tired and shaky and for some reason sore all the time now—he knows he's getting old, but come on!

The only good thing to come out of this morning was the realization that Aizawa is back, and fuck, Toshinori could not be more grateful.

He had to help monitor the younger hero's class while he was away with Yamada, and Toshinori now understands why Aizawa dubs them the hell class.

They're all little *gremlins.* Every single one of them. Even Iida and Yaoyorozu. Toshinori doesn't remember his own classmates ever being so… vicious back in his time. It must be the water these days.

There could very well be crack in it.

Not too long before school starts, Toshinori notes, glancing at his watch. *If I start right now, I can finish the rest of my paperwork at lunch and—*

Oh, wait. Did he forget to pack his lunch today? Shit. He's not just any regular ol' fool, is he? He's quite a few steps above that. He's worse.

He's a premium fool, as Young Midoriya would say.

Today is just starting out great, huh? It's altogether too clear that even after a month of teaching, he's still not cut out for all this stuff. Not yet.

Geez, how did you do it, sensei? Were we that bad, too?

Toshinori's head is so high up in the clouds that he almost doesn't hear the vent hatch ten yards away pop open. He stiffens immediately, eyebrows flying to his hairline when a figure drops down from it with a muted thud. The individual straightens up, and Toshinori's gaze is drawn to the volatile red tendrils crackling around their form. Glittering dark eyes are framed by curly hair, and for a fraction of a

second, Toshinori forgets himself.

Maybe it's the angle, or maybe it's just the surprise of having someone drop from the ceiling like they belonged up there in the first place that does it, but either way it feels like something sharp jabs Toshinori in the throat and drags all the way down to gut him like a fish. His breath is stolen from him, and all he can do is stand there and *stare* as One for All dances under his skin in preparation.

Isn't that—?

"That was good comedy," the figure chuckles, lifting up a scarred hand to rub at a shaking palm, and Toshinori blinks, a harsh shudder running through him.

But then he registers the voice and thus the body that belongs to it, and the world comes back into focus.

"Young Midoriya?" He chokes out.

The boy jumps at the voice and whips around, eyes wide as saucers. The flash of red snuffs out like a candle. "All—All Might?" He squeaks. "How did I not—?"

Midoriya cuts himself off, jaw snapping shut as he jerks forward a little, almost as if he wants to run to him. But then a shadow crosses over his face and he hesitates.

Toshinori just grins, however, eyes crinkling near the edges. His worries are put on the back burner at the very sight of his mentee. He didn't realize just how much he *missed* him. "Hey, my boy!" He walks toward him, and that first step is all it takes to prompt Midoriya forward again. He stumbles at first, but then he's flying at Toshinori at the speed of light, eyes still wide—unsure, it looks like. Midoriya looks almost scared and yet desperate at the same time.

And *shit.* Toshinori forgot just how *fast* he can be.

He inflates into his bigger form on instinct, knowing what's about to happen due to past experience, and just as he thought, Midoriya ends up barreling into him so hard that Toshinori topples over with an *oomph* at the impact.

He's gotten stronger. And, hell, definitely a little heavier!

"At least I can see you're healthy again!" Toshinori grits out, trying for

a smile as he catches his breath.

Midoriya immediately rolls to his feet, making Toshinori realize suddenly that the boy just *hugged* him. Well, was it a hug? It felt like one. It was a *Midoriya hug*— the kind of hug where the boy just faceplants into Toshinori's chest or shoulder and simply waits. He doesn't speak or lift up his arms; he just… what's the word? Vibes?

Yes. Midoriya simply *vibes.* And usually this 'hug' doesn't last very long at all before the boy is scampering off, red in the face.

He can't recall Midoriya initiating contact with him like that in a long time, though. So for him to do that now? As short lived as it was? *Something* must be wrong.

"Shit! Are you okay, All Might?" Midoriya is fretting now, hands wringing together while he makes space for Toshinori to get up. "Sorry, I didn't realize I was going that fast!"

"That's quite alright, Young Midoriya!" He laughs heartily, looking down at him with his hands on his hips. It's only now that he spots the variety of colors splattered on the boy's clothing and hands: paint.

Something that Toshinori is not even going to question. Questioning would make him a witness.

"I'm glad you're back!" Thunder rumbles in the distance, agreeing with the sentiment. He chuckles nervously and rubs his neck. "I was meaning to see you before now, but I was told it would be better to wait. So how are you? I heard you're staying with Aizawa for the time being, so you haven't been too bored, I hope!"

Toshinori also hopes that Midoriya knows he wasn't intentionally ignoring him. If the boy wasn't currently under Nezu's jurisdiction, Toshinori would've done more to see him.

Especially now that everything has been unearthed. Toshinori should've been there for him *before* now, right alongside Aizawa and Yamada. He needed to talk with him and let him know he wasn't upset with him then—because he *knows* his boy. He knows Midoriya would've felt guilty over the whole *homeless vigilante* thing.

The kid is fiddling with his fingers now, and Toshinori blinks when he spots the blank space on the boy's index. *And where did you put your ring? Do you not wear it anymore?*

“Yeah, uh, it’s been okay! I haven’t been that bored. He’s—they’re nice to me. It’s… nice.”

Nice? He’s fidgeting. Nervous. Why is he so tentative?

Toshinori hums and gives him another warm smile, hoping to ease the tension out of Midoriya’s shoulders. “Great! And what about your cat? How has Missy taken to the change in environment?”

Midoriya perks up a bit, just as Toshinori hoped, and answers his question with a little more enthusiasm.

He starts to ramble about how Missy has actually become friends with the other cats in Aizawa’s apartment, and how she’s been gaining a lot more weight because of all the treats the two resident heroes won’t stop feeding her.

Sometime in the middle of it, Toshinori deflates with a tiny cough, but Midoriya takes it in stride. He’s already used to that happening a lot.

The boy maintains eye contact with him for brief intervals but looks away abruptly at some points, as if embarrassed. He’s still apprehensive, it seems.

Hm. Toshinori tips his head a little for him to continue on, not minding the spew of words at all.

The topic starts to change, and all the while Toshinori is busy thinking. Observing. *I wish I could tell what’s going on in that brain of yours, my boy. It would make this all a lot less awkward.*

“So yeah! That’s how she became ruler of the house in under, like, ten minutes of her being there. Even Sushi likes her, which was surprising. ‘Zawa said Sushi is usually really stoic and silent since he’s *ancient as fuck* and also tired of everyone’s shit, so I thought he’d be less accepting of her. But he’s not! It’s really kind of sweet, actually. *Way* too cute.” Midoriya blinks back to himself, straightening up suddenly. “Ah, but how are you, All Might? I didn’t see you much on the news! I was worried you got hurt or something.”

The concern on his face has Toshinori pausing a little. Dark clouds rumble and glide across the sky, turning the hallway a little darker when the light that usually comes in through the floor-to-ceiling windows is blocked. But then the clouds part, and Toshinori watches for just a second, not surprised that Midoriya’s eyes are shining in the darkness. That’s something new, and yet it’s still not alarming for

him.

The rising sun frames Midoriya, and his shadow becomes long and somehow blacker than night, falling short right at Toshinori's feet. It reminds him of a monster with red eyes and sharp teeth, of a mutilated face and a voice that still haunts him in his dreams.

But Toshinori's been thinking those thoughts a lot lately, so they're even easier to push away this time.

"I can assure you I'm not hurt, my boy. Just incredibly tired." He gives a grim look. "But I'm afraid I might still be growing weaker by the day. My time limit is decreasing rapidly, so I'll have to be in this form for a lot longer than usual. It might be best if you don't call me All Might here, at least when there are students around." Toshinori averts his gaze, wincing. "In this form I'm just a secretary here at school. It would be safer if you called me by my real name."

Midoriya blinks, brows furrowing. "Oh! Uh, okay! Are you sure?"

The boy still looks hesitant even after Toshinori tells him he's certain of it, but he doesn't argue. *Does he even know my name?* Toshinori wonders suddenly. *Shit. Have I ever told him before?*

"And you said your time limit is really low, huh?" Midoriya's voice takes on a conspiratorial tone. "How long is it now? What can you do? I know it's probably just the time that's being decreased but are you getting weaker, too? Have your drawbacks gotten worse?"

They continue on like that, and the topic seems to be what Midoriya needed to relax a little. He doesn't look as high strung anymore, and his shoulders aren't as tense.

Toshinori is relieved, to say the least. Midoriya is still the same old boy. He looks tired as well, but still better than Toshinori thinks he's ever seen him. Not as burdened, he daresays. *Nezu was right, then. You did need some time away.*

They catch up on what's been happening to each other during the past week and a half, and it's when Midoriya mentions something about how his old apartment is set to be demolished soon that has Toshinori working his jaw silently, thinking hard.

He hasn't gotten a chance to see this… apartment. The one his ward called his *home* before everything was destroyed. How long did Aizawa say he lived there? Four or five years?

It must have been something for the boy to stay there that long. Or maybe it really *was* nothing, and Midoriya himself had to make it something. It's not like he would've had much of a choice, huh?

Another sharp jab to his chest, and Toshinori's face pulls into a tight frown at the reminder that this boy was homeless. *Has been,* for a very long time.

He didn't trust Toshinori to help him. He didn't trust anyone for that matter.

Eventually, when Midoriya looks to be vibrating hard enough to start floating in the air mid-ramble, Toshinori lays a hand on his shoulder and hunches over a little to look at him. To *truly* look at him.

Midoriya stops immediately, emerald eyes blinking widely up at him in confusion. "All Mi—Yagi? Are you okay?"

"My boy," he begins, tilting his head a little as he pauses to try and find the right words. "Why didn't you ever say how bad it was? I would've helped you. I wouldn't have hesitated to make sure you were safer then."

Even if it meant I would've had to take you in myself.

Silence greets his statement. There's an ocean of unsaid words between them that neither seem to be quite ready to traverse, too afraid to try for fear of drowning in them.

"I know," Midoriya finally whispers, and great, isn't that the fucked up part. The kid knew he would've helped in a heartbeat, and yet he still couldn't trust him.

I'm so sorry. You should have never felt like you had to be so alone. That is a failure on my part.

Toshinori gives a soft, reassuring grin upon seeing the look on his face. "Hey, it's alright! None of this changes anything between us! You being Rabbit was a surprise, sure—" (Toshinori inwardly cheers when he sees the hesitant uptilt to Midoriya's lips) "—but that's quite alright! What matters now is how we move forward, right?"

He gets a nod and that same wobbly smile in reply, prompting him to move forward a little more.

"So!" Toshinori swallows down the lump in his throat and hopes he's

not making some kind of mistake when he holds out his pinky. “No more potentially life-threatening secrets?”

Is this childish? Toshinori feels like it is. But he knows Midoriya wouldn’t be offended. And if this is the only way to get the boy to stop being so destructive to himself, of course he’s going to do it.

He’d do it over and over again. Without hesitation and without complaint.

Midoriya hesitates, eyeing the outstretched pinky before him. Toshinori watches as something dark flits across his kid’s expression, and another bout of lightning cracks somewhere in the near distance. The hero-in-training ducks his head and puts a hand behind his back, seemingly itching at a spot on his back out of nerves.

“No more secrets,” he agrees quietly as he wraps his own pinky around Toshinori's, and even if it’s not as enthusiastic as the hero would’ve liked, it’s enough to ease his worries.

He feels a lot better now. It seems that at least *that* dilemma has been resolved.

For now.

“Ah, my boy! Why don’t you tell me about some of the stuff you’ve done as Rabbit! Maybe about some of your worst fights! I might be able to give you some feedback.”

And, just like a switch has been flipped back on, Midoriya shakes out of his subdued state and continues his previous word vomit, an excited glimmer to his eyes now—just like Toshinori was hoping.

The hero used to get lost and almost tired of hearing the kid’s ramblings almost every day during their ten months of training, but now he’s starting to realize just how much he actually enjoys them.

They’re walking down the hall a few minutes later, still chatting happily with each other, when a figure comes storming around the corner.

Toshinori stops in his tracks, Midoriya following soon after. “Oh, Aizawa! I didn’t get a chance to talk to you at the meeting, but it’s nice to see you up and about again after—!”

“You,” the man interrupts, death in his eyes.

The blond squeaks at the same time Midoriya does. “Me?” They exclaim in unison.

“Midoriya.”

Before the boy in question can even think about running, Aizawa’s capture weapon snakes out and wraps around his torso, making Midoriya hiss when he’s yanked away from Toshinori’s side.

“Morning again, Yagi,” is all Aizawa says, face set as he casually starts to drag Midoriya along behind him. “Excuse us.”

“Ah, uh, of—of course! I’ll see you later, Young Midoriya!”

As the pair turn the corner quickly, Toshinori sees Midoriya give one last wide-eyed glance and tiny handwave before disappearing.

What... the hell?

Toshinori has probably just witnessed the prelude to a murder. He physically has to stop himself from going after them, telling himself that Midoriya’s going to be just fine.

Besides, it seems that he and Aizawa are close.

The thought sends a pang in Toshinori’s stomach, and he forces himself to ignore it. He truly is happy the boy is alright. He got to see him for a bit, so that’s good! He’ll see him again once class rolls around.

For now, though, he has to get a start on those papers. God, why did he take on this job again? He could just *not* do them, really. That’s what he does with his hero paperwork, to be fair. And he hasn’t been fired yet!

But then Toshinori thinks of all of his students and the happy feeling he gets whenever he gets to train them and share his experiences, and he sighs.

Time to search for his long-lost pen.

“That was embarrassing!” Izuku hisses, currently writhing like a dying fish in his teacher’s hold. He kicks out with his legs desperately, trying to break free from the restraints of the capture weapon. “And in front of *All Might,* too, you dick!”

Seriously, couldn’t Aizawa have waited a little longer before stalking up to them so they could at least finish their conversation? They were having a touching moment!

Well, not really touching. It was more awkward than anything, but he’s still happy he got to see his mentor. It doesn’t seem like All M—*Yagi* is mad at him like Izuku worried he was, and he still doesn’t know what to make of that yet. He’s been using One for All for crime, so he thought he’d have *some* repercussions. But the blond just seemed concerned and grateful at Izuku’s appearance, if not a little perturbed. He’s not upset.

Maybe a little disappointed, sure—Izuku didn’t miss the look on his face when he finally noticed he was there—but not truly upset. Not angry.

And it’s funny how Izuku both hates and is grateful for that fact, because maybe Yagi *should* be upset.

His foot manages to touch the ground for half a second, and the boy is about to use one of his quirks to use the contact to his advantage when he’s plucked from the ground yet again, being picked up like a misbehaving cub to be dragged to who knows where.

“The first day, Midoriya. The *first* day.” Aizawa shakes his head with a huff and tightens his grip. “Not even forty minutes left until school starts; why did I actually think you’d be quiet for that much time?”

“Let *go* of me! This is illegal somehow, I just *know it!”*

“This is *all* illegal,” the hero snorts, and Izuku struggles harder in frustration. He twists and tries to aim a kick at Aizawa’s crotch, but the man is ready for it and simply holds him out further away from his body, glaring daggers at him. But the action is done, and Izuku uses the extra space between them now to hike his legs up and plant both of his boots on his teacher’s chest, knocking the breath out of him and making the coils loosen.

Izuku drops to the ground in a blur of red, excited now to be free, but fabric snakes around his ankle before he can scurry away.

“Hey.”

“I swear if you don’t let go of me I’m gonna—I’m gonna—!” Izuku drops his entire weight to the floor, trying to grab onto something when Aizawa just continues to pull him along behind him, seemingly done trying to do this the easy way. But then an idea hits him, and he reaches for his left shoe. “I’ll—I’ll fight you!”

“Shiver me timbers,” Aizawa deadpans, and Izuku can just *hear* the eyeroll. “Now quit it, kid, you’re just going to tire yourself out.”

Despite his best judgement, Izuku *does* stop trying to sever the capture weapon in two with the oversharpened pencil he stole from the storage closet, instead deciding to just lay limp again and let himself slide across the too-clean tile.

This is stupid. Why does Aizawa care so much about this? Does he not have anything better to do? It was one harmless prank! Okay, maybe not *harmless,* but it didn’t hurt anyone!

Maybe. Probably.

Izuku crosses his arms. “You said as long as I stayed in the building I could go off on my own, so why are you being unfair? I haven’t gone near the exits once.”

The hero glances back at him with a quirk of the brow. “I did say that, but that was before I realized you were going to empty seven spray paint canisters onto the wall next to Principal Nezu’s storage room, Midoriya. I can guarantee you that the very *flattering* picture you made of him won’t be appreciated.”

“I didn’t do that, actually, thanks. I would never.” Izuku averts his gaze to the very nice windows to his right. “But if I *did,* I would be offended by that obviously sarcastic comment.”

There’s an irritated huff, and the sound of it makes Izuku’s heart rate spike. He nervously looks back at the man, watching as Aizawa tilts his head to the ceiling and wills himself some patience.

Sometimes Izuku wonders if Aizawa would like to throw him out the window sometimes. He wouldn’t blame him. Hell, he’d *encourage* him to do that. Izuku would be able to cross that off his bucket list.

“Midoriya, you’re lucky Nezu’s not that upset about it. And you should also count yourself lucky that Cementoss already took the liberty of

cleaning it up for you, or else I would've made you do it after school with a toothbrush and some vinegar."

Izuku scowls to himself, cheeks burning. Okay, yeah, he wouldn't have enjoyed that at all. The mural he painted in about thirty minutes flat was huge, so it would've taken him the entire afternoon and evening to get *half* of it scrubbed off.

Thank you, Cementoss. You are my savior now.

He resolves to stay quiet the rest of the time he's being dragged. Aizawa seems to be too upset to even continue lecturing him, as he just settles for another small, long-suffering sigh before slowing down a little in his walking, now confident Izuku won't try to slip away.

Izuku wonders how Aizawa even found out about his little project. Did one of the other teachers stumble upon it, or did he? Or maybe the principal himself saw it—he does have eyes in the form of cameras almost everywhere. Izuku wouldn't be surprised if Nezu was watching him the entire time from beginning to end.

His research on the mammal proves that he would definitely do such a thing, for entertainment or for studious purposes, Izuku doesn't know yet.

Izuku upholds his silent promise to keep quiet to spite Aizawa for just over thirty seconds—it all changes the moment they round another corner and start to head towards a wide door.

His eyes widen. "Wait, Aizawa."

The man ignores him. Izuku's mind starts to buzz as he recognizes more of the people inside the room ahead. He felt them enter UA less than an hour ago when he was planning his mural, but he was hoping he wouldn't have to see them so soon.

And certainly not like this. That would be beyond embarrassing.

"Aizawa, come on!"

His teacher hums in slight question, though it's obvious he's not going to budge.

"There are people in there!" Izuku screeches, resuming his life-or-death struggle to get out of the bindings. He can't even use any of his quirks right now since Aizawa activated Erasure. "This is—*hey!* Let me

go! I don't want to be seen like this!"

"You should've thought of that before deciding to paint a whole *child's* drawing on this school's wall," Aizawa says simply, completely unsympathetic. "Now you get to be stuck with me until class starts."

A fate worse than death.

Despite his protests and wild thrashing, Aizawa stops by the door and picks Izuku up off the ground by his collar, letting his scarf do most of the lifting as he turns the handle.

Oh, fuck.

There's a reason Izuku has never been described as a party-starter or even a party-*goer* by anyone who knows him—excluding the obvious reasons, of course. He just isn't usually the type to be the social butterfly at any kind of gathering. In fact, he's usually the one to make things awkward upon first arriving, or better yet, he's the one to *end* the party!

Which is exactly what he's doing right now.

The moment Aizawa walks into the room, all of the chatter ceases. Izuku feels his soul descend fifteen levels when multiple pairs of eyes turn to stare at the two.

This must be the teacher's lounge. Their offices are here, too.

To make matters even worse, Aizawa doesn't head over to his own desk right away; he stands there at the front of the room, with Izuku still held above the ground with one hand, drawing even *more* attention to their arrival.

Everyone is here. Izuku can see most of his teachers milling about and grouped around each other, along with a couple others. He spots Ectoplasm, Snipe, Ms. Kayama, Cementoss, Power Loader, and even Vlad King.

Where's Yamada?

"Shit." Izuku's voice breaks, and he swallows before trying to continue, now trying to scratch at Aizawa. "You bully!" He hisses quietly. "Let me go!"

Aizawa hums. "No."

For a good five seconds, nobody says anything or moves even a hair. Izuku is about to start squirming again to get down when Ms. Kayama greets him. She turns and plops down in her chair, tilting her head back to wink at him.

“Hey, kid. You’ve been staying dry, yeah? It’s raining cats and dogs out there.” She lets out a soft breath between her teeth. “I hope you slept good last night; today’s gonna be wild. I can *feel* it. It’s going to be one of those exciting days.”

Izuku grins stupidly out of nerves, and it seems that was the icebreaker the room needed, as the other teachers start to acknowledge him too, in their own unique ways.

Except Vlad King. The Class 1-B teacher ignores him entirely, and Izuku can’t help but get a little offended.

How rude. I’m going to call you Chad King now. You look like you’d be a Chad in high school.

He does notice that some of the teachers do seem a little wary of him, namely Power Loader and Ectoplasm, but they are all still really kind to him, so eventually it becomes easier to stop being so on edge and tense, and he responds to their pleasantries in kind.

Aizawa mutters something about the quick change when others are around, and Izuku just elbows him in the throat in one quick motion, having finally gotten a limb free. Aizawa grunts and drops him, and Izuku waits there nervously, instinctively moving to stand closer and a little behind the choking man for comfort, who whacks him in the back of the head as payback.

But Izuku is too busy trying to calm his rising panic to get the last hit in. There are really no new faces in this room, but there’s still a pretty big change in the air.

“Just a warning, kiddo, that a few of the more important teachers were told about your situation. Sorry for not asking you first, but it was a must at the time.”

That’s what Yamada said to him sometime earlier that morning. What that means is they know who he is and what he’s done. The people in front of him know he’s Rabbit, and they know he was *homeless.*

How many times can Izuku go red and start to stutter in one day? This might be a new record.

Do they think differently of him now? Do they hate him? They didn't act like they do (well, except for Chad King), but that could always be a fluke. People like to act, especially heroes. They're experts at it.

Izuku follows Aizawa over to the man's desk, hovering awkwardly over him as his teacher sits at his chair. He doesn't want to interact again with any of the others, but then again he kinda does if only to get it over with. The air shouldn't be this weird. If he could just… turn *invisible,* things would be much easier.

Maybe then he wouldn't have gotten so many sleepless nights in the past.

Everyone goes back to what they were presumably doing before the two walked in, but Izuku can still feel a couple stares on him from time to time.

They're not whispering about him, though, which relieves Izuku. *They're not like the others,* he reminds himself. *They won't make fun of you. Stop worrying so much.*

It starts to rain even harder outside, and it's only then that Kayama beckons him over with a hand. She's talking with Snipe—one of Izuku's other favorite teachers who's about as wild as they come.

Izuku doesn't talk much when Kayama brings him into the conversation, but he stays attentive and alert all the same. They're supposed to be doing the paperwork following their earlier meeting, but of course they're putting that off. Something that Aizawa, however, is not.

Is he really confining me here?

"Ms. Kayama?" Izuku asks a while later, voice a whisper. He doesn't want to interrupt anyone potentially working. "You think he'd notice if I jumped out the window behind me?"

The hero snorts and ponders over the question. "Well, saying as he's only ten feet away and also staring right at you as we speak, I'd say the possibility is pretty high."

"Almost 100%," Snipe agrees from beside her.

Huh. Who would've known?

"Midoriya." Aizawa sounds unfazed, but the slight edge to his voice is

enough to have Izuku straighten up as he walks back to him.

Dammit. The plan has been foiled.

“Go to the showers and wash that paint off your skin, and go put on your uniform like I asked; there’s only fifteen minutes until the bell.” He looks up from his computer, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Where even is it?”

“Ah! Well, you see, what happened was…!”

Izuku trails off, because how is he supposed to explain that he used his shirt as a rag to clean up his art and smudge some of the colors around? The brand new, *pristine* white fabric is not very white anymore, that’s for sure. His green pants aren’t much better.

But then, as if he was waiting for this opportunity to arise, Yamada comes strolling in out of nowhere, smiling proudly and holding something in his hands. “Heya! We’ve got a large crowd this mornin’, huh?” Despite his words, Yamada makes a beeline right for Aizawa and Izuku, plopping down at the desk right next to the hero.

Desk buddies! They’re office neighbors!

“I found your uniform on the ground a couple hallways over,” he exclaims, handing Izuku the bundle of clothing. “I saw it was in pretty bad shape, so I just put it in a quick wash using the laundry stuff here!”

Izuku blinks, unsure whether he should be grateful for Yamada’s kindness or whether he should just curl up into a ball and disappear.

The last option sounds the most tempting.

He slowly makes his way to the boy’s locker room after greeting and then saying goodbye to the blond, happy now to be away from all the other teachers. The storm is starting to lighten up a little, promising warmth. While he usually likes rain, it’s starting to get too gloomy around here.

Izuku’s thoughts drift back to what’s going to be happening in the upcoming hours. He thinks of Kacchan and his friends, of his classmates and how they might react to him being back.

His teachers’ reactions surprised him, but in a mostly good way. He can only hope the same thing will happen again.

Izuku sighs and rubs at his shaking palm, still clutching his dreadful, *spotless* uniform. He can already tell his first day back is going to be a trip.

And maybe not the fun kind.

Chapter End Notes

he crossed his fingers.

the song for this chap really fits izuku i think.

(i live! apologies for the, er, VERY long delay!! i got a job and I've been slammed with school but expect better-scheduled updates in the future now that it's summer! can't wait to get into the good parts very soon! 💕)

e

unbreakable

Chapter Notes

DFSJKLGKJSDFH This is so cute omg!!! Also MISSY!!! This is by SwanInProgress on the server and it's absolutely amazinG!! AIZAWA'S FACE AHHH!! You can find Swan on Tumblr or insta at joyousgeekeryart!

(this chap is for phantom. much inspo was given for this one)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For once, Izuku is the first in the classroom.

Not even Iida is there yet, which is slightly concerning—usually his friend arrives as early as thirty minutes before the bell. But Izuku figures that it shouldn't be too surprising given the circumstances.

Yamada said Ingenium is doing okay, but he most likely won't be able to walk again, right? It must be hard to get used to that.

The attack shouldn't have happened in the first place, Izuku thinks darkly before shaking himself free of those thoughts.

The classroom is exactly the way it was when Izuku was last in it. None of the desks have been moved or rearranged, and everything looks to be in the right spots. But there's a different feel to the air now, Izuku notices.

It's colder here. It feels bigger.

Maybe it's because Izuku is looking around through a different pair of eyes this time. He's changed a bit now that a few drastic events have happened.

On his way to the very large and *tempting* windows, Izuku spots a small box on his desk. Walking closer, he can see that it's a bento box!

A golden ribbon is wrapped around it, and the two loops on the top are molded and trimmed to resemble All Might's hair. How it's even managed to stay upright is a mystery to Izuku.

There's a star-shaped note resting on top of the box, and he instantly recognizes Yamada's slanted handwriting. Izuku's signature Rabbit symbol is drawn on the corner, matching the designs on the box itself, and there are large exclamation points after the words *If ya want, come to the teacher's lounge for lunch!!*

The realization almost doesn't hit him immediately. Yamada… made him lunch? He brought him lunch from the apartment? But Izuku didn't see him make anything for him this morning—he only saw Yamada make his own lunch and then put some of it into what looked like Aizawa's bag.

It makes Izuku feel strangely warm. And it's nice, really, to have the

opportunity to skip going to actual lunch in the cafeteria. He knows he's going to have to face his classmates soon, and lunch will be the perfect time to catch up on everything he's missed, but maybe he is a little apprehensive.

He doesn't want to have to lie to their faces like he did to All Might. Call him cowardice all you want, but he can't do that again.

Izuku gingerly puts the box into his new backpack—this one is dark green with red and black pockets on the sides and front, and while it may not be the pink one that Izuku was given to by Kacchan, he thinks to himself that it's still incredibly cute.

Did they buy this for me? Or did the school provide it?

Oh, wait. *Kacchan.* He totally forgot about his friend for a minute there. What is he going to say to him when he arrives at school? Sure, Izuku may have already talked to him over the phone (it was definitely not a pleasant conversation), but he hasn't seen him in over a week. Not since Izuku lost to him at the festival.

Kacchan promised to kill him when he next saw him, and while it's obvious he won't go through with that threat, Izuku is still a little worried. What *will* he do?

This is probably going to be awkward—and also embarrassing.

Izuku starts to pace around the empty classroom with one hand on his chin, muttering to himself. His head is starting to hurt now. Extract won't shut the fuck up for some reason, which is pretty ironic since it didn't seem to be working when Izuku dropped down above Yagi's head earlier. He couldn't feel One for All at all in his mentor, which is worrisome.

Was that Extract being dumb, or is this just proof that Yagi is getting weaker? Or maybe it's because we share the same quirk and now that I've had it for a bit, Extract isn't recognizing it.

But that's a problem for future Izuku to deal with. Present Izuku has other things to worry about.

Kacchan isn't the type to hold grudges for a long time, but he *is* the type to be extremely petty. Izuku did lie to him for a week and put off contacting him, so he does deserve to be resented at least a little.

It's just how far Kacchan is willing to go that's the question. Murder is,

again, off the table. But daily threats and sour looks? Not off the table. It's on the menu, actually.

Since Izuku would like to think he knows his friend well, maybe he can just predict some of the upcoming events. That way he can prepare himself. He lifts up his hands and uses his hands as puppets to simulate the possible meeting, voice taking on a rough edge as he speaks.

"Hello, my dearest and incredibly kind friend, I must first express how irritated I am due to your inconsistent ways of contacting me. You see, Deku, I thought we had moved past this…" Izuku drops the terrible Kacchan voice and uses his other hand now. "I understand your misgivings, O' Lord Explosion God, but please understand that I am tiny, poor, and under a lot of stress—no, this is so dumb. From the top!"

Yeah, he knows his friend well.

To be fair, Kacchan can be a wildcard sometimes, so it *is* kind of difficult for Izuku to prepare for what their reunion might hold—in fact, even calling it that has Izuku wincing and muttering with even more haste.

It's not a reunion—they were only away from each other for a week! It's more of a *hey, glad you're not six feet under* type ordeal.

The more Izuku starts to make up wild scenarios and conversations using his terrible puppet hands, the more the voices in his brain are convinced he is actually going insane. He's off his rockers. He is *officially* qualified to be put in Tartarus now—

"Izuku."

He rolls his eyes at the hand that's portraying Kacchan. "Don't say my name like that, you know it upsets me. Makes me think you wanna kill me or something."

"Keep being fucking weird and I just might."

"Hey, at least that one was in character! I'm getting better at these."

"Deku."

A flash of spiky blond hair pops up in Izuku's peripheral vision, and he shakes his head dismissively at the interruption. "Shut up, Kacchan,

I'm talking to you on my hand, wait for your tur—"

There's a loud crash as Izuku topples off the desk he was sitting on, his body quite literally folding in on itself as he smashes into the neighboring chair. What the *shit.*

He sees it all of a sudden: the light. He's sure of it now. Despite the fact that the room is pretty dark due to the storm outside, he can *see* it.

Izuku was right. Their reunion *would* be embarrassing. He takes back every damn thing he said now that he knows Kacchan was probably there listening to everything he was spewing.

All Might, please smite me right now. You'd be doing your mentee a favor.

He's begged for that to happen countless times, but has his wish ever actually been granted? Only once.

(It was a cold, boring day of training—they were both curious to find out what would happen if Yagi tried to change the weather again using a *United States of Smash!* It was an accident, really, the way the lightning came down and struck Izuku of all things there on that beach. Yagi would not stop apologizing, and it was only when Izuku started threatening to try and drown himself again that he ceased his attempts to bring Izuku to a hospital.)

A shadow falls over him, and Izuku sees Kacchan's blank face hovering a few feet above him.

Huh. So that's why Extract was being a nuisance. It was trying to tell him someone was coming—it just didn't feel like being particularly pointed about it. *Sheesh. The only thing I use you for, Extract, and you're still useless.*

"…. You're here early."

"And you're not dead," Kacchan says evenly, the calm before the storm. His hair is wet, probably from running through the actual storm outside. It makes him look funny, especially since the spikes in his hair are just slightly rounded out because of it.

He looks like a flattened porcupine.

Izuku gives a nervous grin. "You don't have to sound so disappointed, y'know. I told you I wasn't!"

Kacchan bends down to grip Izuku's freshly-washed uniform by the shirt, and the boy squeals as he's dragged up and out of the tight space.

"Hey, hey, come on! I'm *fragile*—oh."

This is… definitely not what Izuku was expecting. In the seventy-four scenarios he made up in his head and even acted out, he did not foresee this one being an option.

Kacchan is hugging him. *Tightly*. Well, hug might be a *strong* word depending on your definition of it, but it *is* a hug for Kacchan's standards, even if the boy is practically just choking him.

Two hugs from two different people… in one day?

It almost doesn't seem real. When was the last time Kacchan initiated a hug? Izuku can't remember, probably because the answer is never.

"You think giving me a stupid note and phone call would be enough to save your ass?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, kinda."

Kacchan's hands grip the back of Izuku's shirt a little tighter, and Izuku just lets it happen. His chin rests on his friend's shoulder, as there's not much else for him to do, and he frowns.

"Your shampoo smells like cherries," he says after a sniff, and Kacchan immediately shoves him away, setting his own bag down at his desk.

"After school you're coming to the house," the blond demands. "The hag wants to see you. She's been on my ass all week about telling you to come over."

Oh no. There's a reason Izuku refused to call her or let Kacchan put her on the phone.

And to think Izuku was worried about what *Kacchan* would do to him. Mitsuki must be out for blood.

He grins again and rubs the back of his neck, turning to look anywhere but at Kacchan. At least the windows are large enough to provide a decent distraction. "Yeah, I don't think that's a good idea just yet. It might be safer if we just… wait a little?"

For a few more weeks, maybe.

Kacchan snorts. “What, ya scared of her or something?”

Okay, that’s a little unfair. Izuku isn’t *scared,* thank you very much. Not of Auntie—never in a million years would he be truly scared of her. Rather, he’s terrified of what will happen to them *all* once certain truths come to light.

Izuku’s brows dip down, and he wrings his hands together to quell his sudden tremors. “Kacchan?” He starts nervously, completely forgetting about his friend’s previous question. “You still haven’t told her about where I lived before, right?”

The few seconds of silence in response has Izuku’s heart rate spiking.

“You mean about where you *weren’t* living?” Kacchan bites. “Because you sure as hell weren’t living with that old bastard like you told her.”

“Kacchan.”

He says it quietly, like a warning, because the way the blond is talking tells Izuku that his friend is about to go on another rant, and they can’t do that. Not here. Not now. Not when they just got to see each other again after what felt like weeks.

Kacchan scoffs. “No, I didn’t tell her you lived on the damn streets; it would kill her. *You’re* going to tell her yourself today, you shit nerd.”

The last part is so sudden that Izuku doesn’t bother correcting him about how he technically wasn’t living on the streets—he did have a home, even if it was abandoned. “I don’t even think I’ll be allowed to go to the house after school. I’d have to ask Aizawa, and I’m kind of already on his shit list this morning. I doubt he’ll let me go without him, and I really don’t want him and Auntie to meet.”

Auntie knows things, and she’s prone to sharing most of her thoughts with no filter. That’s not something Izuku would like to be made clear when Aizawa is around with open ears.

The same could also be said the other way around. Aizawa knows a lot, and while he’s much better at controlling himself and keeping things quiet, it’s still not something Izuku is willing to risk.

Aizawa and the others are already curious about his father, and Izuku isn’t willing to find out whether or not the man is petty enough to ask Mitsuki about him.

She'd tell him everything she thinks about Hisashi, too.

But how could Izuku blame her for that? She's just always wanted what's best for her boys.

"His shit list, huh? What did you do?"

Izuku's head snaps back to glare at him incredulously. "Why do you assume I did something? Maybe Aizawa is just an ass and likes to make things difficult! Ever think of that?"

Kacchan stares at him as if to say *really? You're really saying that?*

"Okay, to be fair I think I'm on *everyone's* shit list now." Izuku crosses his arms petulantly and turns away. "I can already tell some of the teachers don't like me anymore. And All Might mentioned something about a meeting they all had to attend this morning, too, so I imagine that went just swell."

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what the topic of that meeting was. Izuku doubts the others trust him now—if they even did in the first place. Will Yamada and Aizawa be allowed to cut him some slack? Enough to go to his friend's house? And maybe even stay the night?

Maybe he'd be allowed to if he asked Yamada. Aizawa doesn't *have* to know… okay, yeah, that's a pretty stupid idea right off the bat. Aizawa always figures things out one way or another.

Kacchan's gaze burns his back. It feels pretty judgmental, honestly. There's a beat of silence, and then: "What have you told them?"

There's a *ping* somewhere at the back of Izuku's mind, and the boy suddenly feels like the world just completed a quick save—almost like what a game does before the player enters an important and equally as dangerous scene.

Oh boy.

"What?" he asks, already apprehensive. He turns to look at his friend, whose expression is intense. "Told who about what?"

Kacchan rolls his eyes. "That's what I'm asking. What have you told them? Nothing?"

Izuku was right. He's entering a dangerous scene now. He knows

exactly who Kacchan is referring to, and he knows what he's asking about.

His friend never gives up.

Rain drums against the large windows in the classroom, and Izuku is thankful for the volume of it. It's loud enough to probably drown out their current conversation so the camera in the corner of the room can't catch it. It's a new camera, he notices.

It must've been recently installed.

"I said to you over the phone I haven't told them much," he starts carefully, thinking of all the things he's still keeping from Yamada and Aizawa. His stomach gives a funny *swooping* feeling at the reminder, and he tries to ignore it. "I'm not planning on telling them anything more, either. Not yet," he amends at Kacchan's look.

That doesn't stop the blond from rounding on him, though, eyes flashing. "Hah? But you're fucking living with them now! They deserve to know at least *some* shit!"

Izuku shakes his head and turns away even though his friend has a point. "That doesn't mean anything."

"So you're just going to be walking around on eggshells with them, is that it? I didn't think even you would be so weak. That's a coward's move."

"Why are you being so mean!" Izuku hisses back, glancing at the entrance of the classroom nervously. "I've only been with them for like a week—!"

"You told me they're already asking you about Hisashi and everything else, so what's the big deal in telling them? You're just making everything harder than it has to be. You said things are different now. Why can't this be different, too?"

Christ. Here they go again. Izuku should've known this would happen. The hug lured him in. It was just something to make Izuku let his guard down. While he's certain Kacchan didn't mean it like that at all, that's still how it feels.

It's too early in the morning to have these heavy discussions. Especially in public.

“Oh, yes, Kacchan. You’re absolutely right!” His face lights up in mock elation, his panic lighting a fire so hot inside him that he can’t even begin to quell it. “I should just tell them all about my spectacular life! Maybe I’ll even tell them about all of the wonderful memories I made with dad, huh? Wouldn’t want to leave out all the sweet details, either. Hey, what do you think they’ll say when I tell them all about how we used to play catch with *quirks!”*

By the end of his outburst, Kacchan is dead silent, glaring.

Izuku blinks, realizing what he just said, and turns away again with a groan. He lifts a hand to rub at his temple, wincing. “Did you have to bring this up today?” he asks, quieter this time.

“Someone has to,” Kacchan says without hesitation, but it’s not as angry as before. “You’ve been going around in circles like this for years. Whenever the opportunity to get real help comes along, you always look the other direction and refuse to even humor the idea of __”

“What’s telling them about Hisashi going to do? It’s not like that’ll magically make things better. Everything’s already happened, Kacchan. They’d all just be in more danger and would be even *more* worried when they shouldn’t be. I’m fine.”

Are you? Izuku’s mind challenges, but the boy is so used to this by now that it’s nearly second nature to push the thought away entirely.

Kacchan seems to be thinking something along the same lines, though, as he still doesn’t back down.

“Shouldn’t be worried? Ya think they wouldn’t want to know you’re being haunted by that bastard?”

“I’m already haunted,” he points out, thinking of the voices he hears in his mind when the world slows down too much. When the shadows start looking less like monsters and more like people. “Just stop it. There’s no chance of me telling them shit until he’s *gone.”*

I don’t want them to get hurt. Father used to love using others to make me obey. He’d do it to them, too. Just for fun. And I wouldn’t know what to do if he did.

“Fine!” Kacchan snaps suddenly, palms sparking as he slides off his desk. Izuku feels One for All stir in response, and he kicks it down immediately. While he usually loves sparring with his friend, engaging

right now wouldn't result in another one of their *friendly* fights. He doesn't want to start something like that up again.

Izuku is a ball of anxiety, arms crossed tightly across his chest and teeth worrying his bottom lip as Kacchan stalks over to him. He towers over Izuku, and the boy hates how their height difference is being made even more apparent when he has to lift his chin up to meet his friend's gaze.

"Once he's gone, yeah? You just said it." Kacchan jabs him in the chest with a finger. "The fucking moment he's out of the picture entirely, you're telling *someone* about everything he did. I don't care who, but you have to do it. I can't do this shit anymore. Not telling people before is what got you into this mess. That's why you almost got killed that night—that's why *Missy* almost died. Because *you're* too scared to let go of all that shit. That was on *you."*

The accusation hurts, mostly because it's true. Izuku can recognize that—he has recognized that. But bringing up Missy was honestly a low blow. Kacchan knows how to hurt him without putting much effort in at all.

There are more people walking into UA; Izuku can feel them. Teachers are starting to go back to their classrooms to prepare for the first lesson. This has to stop soon. Izuku doesn't know why he let the conversation go on for this long.

Kacchan just couldn't have waited until after school, could he? But then again, that isn't quite fair to say either, huh?

Izuku shouldn't blame someone else for something he could've fixed a long time ago.

The day he dies is the day he forgets about everything I've yet to pay for. I'm sorry, Kacchan, but you're gonna be waiting a while until that happens.

"Okay," he says, whispering it like a promise, a decree. "When he's gone."

This one isn't a lie.

Kacchan nods once, and at the same time the door to the classroom slides open. Izuku straightens up and turns to stare at Iida, having felt him coming a while back.

“Iida! It’s nice to see you!” Izuku’s heart jumps in his throat, and he swallows it back down to grin at his friend. “It’s been a while.”

The blue-haired boy looks genuinely surprised to see him. “Ah, good morning, Midoriya! Glad to see you’re back! Are you alright?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m great! And thank you! I’m glad to be back.”

He’s quieter than usual, Izuku notes when Iida doesn’t question him further or ask him to elaborate on the first part. Out of most of his classmates, Izuku knows Iida is the most respectful, but he also knows the boy is also one of the most caring. *He looks subdued. Lost in thought.*

Izuku listens closely to Iida greet Kacchan as well, with Kacchan barking back a *yeah, yeah, whatever, now leave me alone!* Iida’s tone of voice is slightly different from how Izuku last remembers it. The change is minuscule, but it’s there.

He sits there at his desk, the clouds outside a perfect representation of how the atmosphere feels inside the classroom, and busies himself with getting his new notebooks and materials out of his backpack. He hears Kacchan give a disgusted snort at the sight of it, but he doesn’t comment on it.

Izuku knows the man who tried to kill Iida’s brother personally. He knows him well, almost too well at times. And the worst part is that Izuku wasn’t exactly Stain’s enemy during that entire time. Far from it.

It feels like a betrayal to be sitting here.

But Iida is of course oblivious to the sort-of accomplice he’s talking to and catching up on, and Izuku can’t tell if that’s better or worse.

When Izuku’s brain starts to run a little too quickly for comfort, when Kacchan’s gaze on his back becomes too hot for him to handle, he clears his throat and decides to just *go* for it. “Hey, um, Iida, about your brother—”

“It’s fine,” Iida interrupts, leaving Izuku’s mouth still slightly open. “You needn’t worry about my brother. I apologize if he or I caused you any undue stress. He’s healing rather well now, so there’s no need to worry!” Iida’s glasses flash when another bout of lightning strikes. Izuku can feel the rumbling in his bones. “But I do appreciate your concern.”

It sounds genuine, but the dismissal is clear. Izuku dips his head and hopes his voice is comforting as he replies. “Yeah! Of course.”

Izuku watches him continue to get ready for class for just a moment longer before turning to stare down at his desk. That look in his friend's eye; he knows it well. He knows it intimately.

And it’s scary to see it on Iida’s face.

Soon enough, everyone else starts to trail into the classroom, and Izuku has to put his worry on the back burner for a bit, a new kind of burning panic working its way up from his stomach.

“Hey, Deku!”

Yeah, this is going to be fun.

He smiles at Uraraka and the others, and honestly? It’s not as forced as he thought it would be. He’s worried about how he’s going to explain his absence to them, but it’s okay, really.

Izuku finds that maybe he did miss this.

Names. Fucking *names.* Izuku doesn’t like names.

He doesn’t like titles or surnames, and he *barely* likes nicknames. He only likes nicknames when they can be weaponized or used as an insult against criminals. He only deals with nicknames from Kacchan because, well… he doesn’t actually know. Kacchan has always been the exception.

But what Izuku hates more than names is coming *up* with names. He’s shit at that. Just look at his quirks! He named a good portion of them himself, and you can see how simple they are.

Izuku glares at his whiteboard, rolling his marker around between his fingers. This is annoying and also incredibly frustrating. Izuku would rather someone else come up with his hero name, for fuck’s sake. He probably won’t even make it to graduation, so it’s not like a name matters.

Yeah, he's out of ideas.

When Aiawa showed them all how many draft picks they each got for the internships, Izuku was surprised. Todoroki was first with a grand total of 4,123 picks despite only making it to the top eight. Kacchan followed close behind, and the next was Tokoyami.

That's not what surprised Izuku; what surprised him was the fact that he got fourth place, which is a lot higher than Izuku expected he would get.

His classmates were confused as to why Izuku wasn't higher on the list since he did get second place in the festival, but Izuku knows why.

It was the motherfucking chicken. It threw everyone off and made him look even more homeless and scrappy than he already was at the time. Izuku has seen some of the headlines about the festival, and he's not too enthused about his new nicknames: KFC Boy and Explosion Magnet. Some newslines have even just taken to literally calling him that one homeless kid.

Izuku thinks that he *does* have a right to feel offended by that last one even though they weren't wrong. He does.

The students will get a chance to think about which agency they want to intern at sometime after they choose their hero names—something that Izuku was not so excited about. *I would've gone to Endeavor's just to fuck with him, but I know damn well he didn't choose me. We just have to choose something before the week is over, right? How hard can it be?*

Wait, doesn't All Might have an agency? It would be fun to get more training with his mentor in such a professional setting, though it may be more difficult with Yagi's decreasing health. Would he even allow Izuku to intern with him, or would that be considered favoring?

He doesn't want Yagi to be made fun of by the other teachers. Kacchan already told him that some of the class were remarking on his and All Might's closeness while he was away, so it's not so far-fetched to think that maybe the teachers might be miffed about it too.

Izuku honestly doesn't think Yagi is *favoring* him, exactly, it's just that the man doesn't know how to hide his concern very well. It's not really favoring… right?

"So all that's left is Bakugou's revision, Iida, and then Midoriya!" Kayama-sensei's voice reaches Izuku's ears with sudden clarity, and he

blinks back to reality. Oh, shit. Yeah. Names.

After Kacchan is sent back to his seat after being denied yet another *wonderful* alias, in Izuku's own terrible opinion, Iida goes up next. He seems to think long and hard about something before turning his whiteboard around to show his neat handwriting.

Tenya. So he's going by just his first name. Somehow this is surprising.

Izuku stands on shaky legs when Iida goes back to his seat, making his way to the front of the room with nothing on his board yet. He just doesn't *know* , dammit. Should he go the first name route like Todoroki and Iida or just make up something dumb? He should've asked Uraraka what she thought, as she's a lot more creative with this type of stuff.

A hero name could be considered as just another nickname, so what would Izuku be okay with being called by the world? He barely even likes his own name, so this is tough.

"What about *Bunny?"* Aizawa snarks just quietly enough for Izuku to hear. He's leaned up against the wall behind his desk, and the sleeping bag he's in muffles his voice just slightly. Though his eyes are closed and he *looks* like he's sleeping, he's obviously not.

And you know what? Just for that stupid fucking jab and the way Aizawa is most definitely sporting some kind of shit-eating grin on his face, Izuku would've done it. He would've tried to put his hero name down as Bunny just to get back at the hero, but unfortunately that's already the name of a very popular stripper that Izuku knows. She comes into the Club all the time; he wouldn't want to tarnish her reputation.

It would've been a fun name, though. That part is undeniable.

He needs to pick something. It can be anything—it doesn't matter! Why is he getting so stuck up on this? It doesn't—it *shouldn't* matter. Names are just names, they don't always have to represent who you are. They're just placeholders. They don't have to have any attachment or emotion behind it.

Not… not always.

Nineteen other pairs of eyes are staring right at him. They're waiting for an answer. Dammit.

Hisashi loved names, Izuku thinks suddenly. His father always had a plethora of nicknames that he loved to use for his sons and enemies. He used to call Izuku a lot of things.

But for all his fascination with names and titles, All for One did not like Kacchan's nickname for Izuku. On multiple occasions, Izuku can remember the man trying to convince him not to stand being called that, as *what kind of friend calls you useless, my boy?*

He hated the term Deku and would only ever use it to mock Izuku or to get him to shape up. And it worked, really. Back then, at least.

Izuku didn't like being called Deku then, not by Kacchan or his father or anyone, but eventually he started to like it. Eventually the word started to take on a new meaning for him. For him and Kacchan both.

"Like you can do it! I think it sounds nice!"

Sometimes he even prefers that nickname over his own name. So maybe it isn't really just Kacchan that's the exception for giving nicknames.

It's Deku.

"You've got a name yet, kid?" Kayama prods, and Izuku hastily uncaps his marker before he can think better of it.

Hisashi wouldn't like it, that same nasty voice says in his head, and Izuku grits his teeth as he flips the whiteboard for the class to see.

Maybe that's part of the reason why Izuku is choosing it. As much as he hates it, everything does end up leading back to his father at some point. One way or another.

"Are you fucking kidding me!" Kacchan hisses, nearly snapping his own marker in two at his seat.

Izuku just smiles as the rest of his classmates nod and compliment the choice. Uraraka looks slightly concerned at first, but she seems to understand after seeing the look on Izuku's face.

Sometimes you can learn to love something you grew to hate.

Later in the day, after Kacchan has been forced to give up on picking a name for now (he refused to accept any of Izuku's own fine ideas), Izuku turns to his friend with a shadowed face. The weather still

hasn't let up outside; it seems it was supposed to be a miserable day today.

"Hey. About Todoroki. How did he look on the first day back after the sports festival?"

Kacchan doesn't question why he's asking this so randomly, too used to Izuku's interesting ways by now. Izuku has been having *thoughts.* The kind of thoughts that lead to crime.

Maybe even *felonies,* he thinks once Kacchan answers him.

Bruised. Beaten. Overall not very good-looking.

Izuku crosses his ankles and hums as his mind runs. He balances his pen on top of his knuckles and covers his mouth with the palm of his other hand, one elbow on the table. He keeps his gaze fixed on how Uraraka talks excitedly with Todoroki and Iida, who looks a little less subdued now.

All three of them are interesting. Iida has the whole issue with his brother and Stain, Uraraka seems to have a lot on her plate and might be suffering from it, and Todoroki… was so obviously trained at home.

Izuku did not inflict the marks that Kacchan described. He would know, as he counted each bruise and cut and scrape he gave his opponents during the festival. Every little mishap.

Todoroki must've gotten even more injured at home, *after* the festival, and Izuku doubts it was of his own volition. And really, there's only a couple other reasons as to why he would look like that. Today he doesn't look too bad—he always looks amazing—but Izuku can imagine how he must've looked on that first day back.

He doesn't realize he's muttering darkly to himself, his face shadowed with thinly hidden contempt, until Kaminari pokes him in the shoulder. He must have migrated all the way from his seat. "Hey, you good, man?"

Izuku straightens up and nods quickly, tearing his gaze away from his friends. "Yeah! Just tired, that's all!"

It's not really a lie.

By the time lunch rolls around and Izuku has come up with some

excuse as to why he can't eat with everyone today, he really *is* starving. But instead of the plain rice he would usually get in the discount line, today he has something more to look forward to.

He follows Aizawa to the teacher's lounge after most of the hallways have been cleared of the students, as he wasn't exactly allowed to travel via the vents this time. He tries to avoid his other teachers as best he can by pulling up a chair between Aizawa and Yamada's desk, making himself as small as possible.

The air in here is awkward at first, but it's ultimately better than being crowded by his friends in the cafeteria. He can have one more day to prepare for that again.

He *did* tell them he'd explain himself eventually. He intends to keep that promise.

Yamada assures him that he doesn't *have* to eat here with them if he doesn't want to, that he can leave at any time, and Izuku appreciates the concern. He must be able to tell Izuku is a bit uncomfortable here.

It's not a problem, though! It's not a big deal. Izuku has been in *way* more uncomfortable situations. Besides, he actually likes eating with them.

Not that he'd say that. Nope.

Izuku can nearly cry when he opens up the bento box to the sight of beautifully shaped rice balls and other foods. There are little stars and bunny faces and carrots! They've even got miniature noses and whiskers on some of them too!

It's so cute that Izuku might just implode. Preparing the bento itself must have taken *ages*. It's obvious that a lot of care and thought was put into it.

His cheeks burn when he picks up one of the bunny-shaped rice balls and takes a bite into it. He almost feels bad about eating it.

Izuku waits until Yamada is finished with talking to Kayama before attempting to speak. "Thank you for the food," he says, still embarrassed. "And—and the bento box! Thank you for buying that for me."

"Oh, you're most assuredly welcome, listener, but I only prepared the food. All Might is the one who bought you the bento box, actually. He

gave it to me last week to give to you." Yamada turns his full attention to him and smiles softly. "Figured today would be the perfect time to do that, y'know?"

Oh. Yagi bought it… for me? He bought a bento box with green bunnies on it—bunnies that have All Might's hair as their ears? A design that is almost obviously a reference to Rabbit?

Or maybe Izuku is looking too much into it.

But then a funnier thought arises. Was Yagi trying to show some support?

Izuku suddenly has this very weird image of his mentor asking for this to be specially made, as Izuku knows that this isn't just out there on the market. This is probably one of its kind!

He busts out laughing at the mere idea of it and nearly drops his chopsticks. Half the people in the room look at him in surprise, and Izuku covers it up with a cough. "Sorry. It's, uh, allergies."

"That doesn't even—"

Yamada hushes Aizawa, but he's grinning too. Just because it's raining like fuck outside doesn't mean Izuku can't still get allergies.

After Izuku gushes and rambles over his new phone even more to Yamada and giggles with him over some of the hero's latest interviews, he is eventually left with just Aizawa and a few other teachers. Yamada had to go back to his classroom early to help with a lesson.

Aizawa is on his tablet, back to doing some work. But it looks to Izuku like it's outside work. Maybe even case stuff! He's been doing that a lot lately.

Izuku is just sending another stupid meme to Kacchan when Aizawa's phone pings. The man huffs out something between a laugh and a sigh as he reads whatever the notification says.

"The hospital you stayed at is going to update their security measures soon," Aizawa says, a tinge of amusement in his voice. "Hopefully they'll upgrade their locks too."

Izuku pauses with his food held an inch from his mouth and frowns."What, did someone break in and steal something?"

That's the only reason a hospital would make a sudden push for security upgrades. That kind of stuff is expensive to just do out of the blue.

Aizawa snorts. "No, kid. *You* broke *out.* No patient has been able to do that so easily before, especially not a patient who was *supposed* to be bedridden at the time."

The reminder of his hospital escape makes Izuku flush, but he pushes away his slight shame and wrinkles his nose. It's not like it was hard to leave the hospital. They assumed he wouldn't go out of the window, and that was *their* mistake. It wasn't Izuku's fault at all; the bedsheets in the linen closet were just begging to be used, so Izuku *had* to do something.

"Well, I guess whatever they're doing now will be better than having no security systems in place at all," he says, struggling to get the last bite of beef from the corner of his bento box. Aizawa just stares at him, and Izuku throws him a look. "What? Is there something on my face? Food in my teeth?"

"They had good security before, Midoriya. The lock on your window was made to withstand even All Might's strength."

Izuku actually has to take a second and wrack his brain to think about whether or not that's true. "Huh? I don't remember there being one like that."

"Kid, just because it was easy for *you* to break doesn't mean it wasn't good in theory."

What? Izuku puts down his chopsticks to study his teacher's face, the last bite of beef forgotten now. He's not joking, is he? No, he wouldn't be pulling his leg over something this stupid. That's not his style. And something about the fact that Izuku has garnered Aizawa's full attention now tells the boy that *nope,* this isn't a joke.

"Sensei, I meant there wasn't a lock on the window when I left." He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Having to explain how he ran is a *little* embarrassing. "All I had to do was lift up the latch and, uh, *go."*

Aizawa's eye twitches, and when he speaks, his voice has an edge to it. "Midoriya, you had to take off the lock before being able to scale down the—"

"No, I didn't!" The words come out in a rush, and Izuku winces at his

own defensiveness. He's suddenly reminded of before, when Aizawa asked him if he took the last jelly pack that night, except the only difference between then and now is that Izuku isn't lying this time. "I promise, I didn't! There wasn't a lock on the window at all!"

Aizawa stares at him suspiciously for a moment, as if to get him to crack, but Izuku holds his gaze. He may not be the most trustworthy at times (the promise he made Yagi that morning comes to mind), but he's really not lying this time around.

It would be a stupid thing to lie about anyway.

After a few moments, the man just furrows his brows and glances back down at the tablet before him. "When I left your hospital room, there was a steel lock on the window that you would need a special fingerprint to get off. I know because I *made sure of it.* You're saying you didn't see one at all?"

"I promise I didn't."

There's no hesitation when he answers, because dammit now Izuku is a little indignant. And maybe he's also a little freaked out now. It might not seem like a big deal, but he knows Aizawa doesn't mess up on stuff like that. If he said there was a lock when he left, then *there was a lock when he left.*

And Izuku may be dumb, but he wouldn't forget something like that either. He remembers simply opening the window and throwing his makeshift rope down to leave. He didn't have to pick or break a lock or anything.

Did the doctor take it off? No, that would be stupid. And why would the doctor have the fingerprint for the lock, anyway? Wouldn't that go to the head of security? Or that specific wing's head person? That would make more sense.

Aizawa leans back in his chair, looking perturbed now. His eyes narrow. "The nurse found the lock under your bed. Said it looked like it fell from the window and rolled, so she assumed it got there from you breaking it."

Izuku pushes away his bento box entirely and itches at the scar on his jaw. "Did someone override it? If it was an electric lock, they wouldn't have to be in the room to do it." He tips his head in thought. "In fact, they could do it anywhere. They would just have to have access to the online control panels, and maybe the schematics of the building.

Though they would need to have some pretty good technology. Not even I could do that on my own from a large distance. AINA would usually take care of that for me, but if someone had their own program…"

The boy breaks off in a mutter and covers his mouth with a palm. If someone did unlock it without using a fingerprint, they would've had to have broken the entire thing using brute force or by unlocking it using another method. Since it is fingerprint sensitive and also apparently heavy duty, it must have been connected to some electric wires. So by sending strong charges through them to fry it, you could potentially override the entire thing and get it to snap off.

Which means someone must have been targeting Izuku personally to go through all that trouble, or else a bigger portion of the building would've been messed with. Did Aizawa get any reports that any of the other locks in other rooms fell off? Doesn't sound like it, so it must've been just in Izuku's room, then, huh? Who could have done something like that? And *why?* Did they know he would run the moment he saw the opportunity? In his state, he definitely wouldn't have been strong enough to break off an 'All Might-grade' lock, so it's not like he would've escaped had the lock stayed on.

This was deliberate. Whoever did it must've had some meticulous planning done beforehand. Or maybe they were just lucky.

When he tunes back into the real world, Aizawa looks a little pissed, though not at Izuku. His gaze is hard as he starts to pack up some of his stuff. "Don't worry about it right now, kid. I'll take care of it."

Shit. I'd hate to be on the other end of that look.

Despite being a little offended that he just got told not to worry about it when the problem literally *involves* him, Izuku chooses to focus on how the man seems to be getting more irritated by the second. Does he know who did it? Or does he at least have a good idea of who might be involved?

Wait, maybe he's just constipated. He definitely looks like he is right now. What if he's not even paying attention to their conversation anymore?

"Do you need to go to the bathroom or something?" Izuku asks, mouth moving before he can stop it.

That seems to bring some train of thought to an end, as Aizawa blinks

and looks up, expression smoothing over as he easily ignores the question. “There’s still fifteen minutes left for lunch. If I’m not back by then, make sure you get to class. And no fooling around, got it?”

Izuku gives a horrible salute, putting one hand behind his back so he can cross his fingers. “Understood, sensei, sir! I won’t!”

As expected, the hero just pinches the bridge of his nose before pushing in his chair to leave.

He should really stop expecting Izuku to take him seriously when it comes to promising to curb his behavior.

Izuku lives to create disorder, and just because he has people here now to tell him not to do that anymore doesn’t mean he’s going to listen to them.

Breaking laws and expectations is something he knows how to do intimately. Like *hell* he’s ever going to stop.

Shouta has been in his boss’ office so many times since he started working at UA that it’s honestly kind of concerning. He could have a three-inch layer of blindfolds on and be walking around the school in the dead of night and *still* be able to find his way there with no trouble at all. It’s like second nature to him, which is pretty screwed up to think about.

So yeah, he’s been in there a lot.

But if he’s being honest, Shouta can’t remember the last time he ever felt this *angry* before arriving.

He walks swiftly through the mostly empty halls, something hot eating away at his insides. He’s aware, at the back of his mind, that the spark of rage that ignites in his chest is born of the fear that Midoriya could have gotten hurt, or worse, but all Shouta knows is that he’s furious in a way that makes his entire body feel too hot, his muscles tightening as he stalks towards Principal Nezu’s office.

“I promise I didn’t!”

His eye twitches, hands making fists at his sides. Midoriya wasn’t lying there. Shouta has come to know the difference between the kid’s *I’m so guilty right now* voice and *okay, for once I’m actually not lying* one, and so he’s fairly certain he was being truthful.

And Midoriya telling the truth in this circumstance can only mean one thing. There’s nothing else that could explain it.

Shouta doesn’t bother knocking. He knows the mammal must have seen him coming a while back.

He doesn’t *kick* open the door, technically, but it does get shoved open with a lot more force than is probably necessary. His eyes zero in on his boss, who is sitting politely at his desk with a cup of tea in his paws.

The bastard was definitely expecting him.

There’s no time for pleasantries. “You did that on purpose,” Shouta says coldly, making his way further inside the office.

Principal Nezu smiles. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, Aizawa.”

Don’t play dumb.

“You did something to that lock, didn’t you? At that hospital.” It may be phrased like a question, but Shouta knows immediately after the words leave his mouth that he’s correct. “You wouldn’t even need to leave this office to do it, it would be that easy.” Too easy. “You let Midoriya go, and in doing so you put him in danger. You put *everything* in danger. What if we didn’t find him in time? Or at all? That would be on *you,* Nezu.”

The mammal hums in consideration and stirs his tea with a claw, unperturbed by the accusatory tone. “I merely leveled the playing field a little. I needed to gauge Midoriya’s emotional state and see what his goals were. Knowing where he wanted to go or wanted to do after such a traumatic event was imperative to my research, and also for his safety.”

“You—” Shouta cuts himself off. It makes sense, really. Finding Midoriya at that apartment after he ran *did* tell him a lot about what kind of mindset he was in, and Shouta did gain some more

information about him, but that doesn't matter. So, *so* many things could've gone wrong.

The point is that Nezu must be absolutely *sick* to allow—not just allow, *make way for* —something like that to happen. He endangered a child's whole *life.*

Because what if Shouta arrived a few minutes later? Would he have still found Midoriya kneeling down in the ruins of that apartment? Or would he have had to search the streets and come across something far worse?

He wouldn't know what to do with himself if Midoriya didn't turn out okay that day.

"His trauma is not something you can play around with. He's not some *zoo animal* that you can throw things at and experiment on just to see how he'll react." Shouta grips his capture weapon on instinct to calm the fluttering of nerves inside his stomach. He'd never think about using it, as he still has exemplary control over himself, but the action is undeniable.

The Principal just has a way of pissing people off without doing much of anything at all. It's almost impressive.

Shouta breathes out through his nose, forcing himself to settle down before continuing tightly. "Midoriya isn't here for your sick entertainment. He is a child who barely counts as a *highschooler,* for god's sake, and he deserves to be treated with the same level of care that you would expect from anyone else in this situation. But I guess this shouldn't come as much of a surprise, right? The only reason you haven't turned him over to the authorities is because you're not finished with him yet."

"I haven't even started," Nezu corrects, as if he didn't just admit to being a complete psycho. "But yes, you could say that. And I'm fairly certain I'm not alone in saying that he has untapped potential that would be just a *shame* to not explore. In fact! The reason for handing him that application that evening was so you could push him to the limits at this school, was it not?"

No. It was also to protect him. To keep his ass in line so he wouldn't get himself killed. Tsukauchi begged me to do it.

He doesn't answer just yet. He knows a rhetorical question from his boss when he hears one.

“We’ve both had the same thoughts about our dear student, just different ideas on how we should approach this most peculiar situation. And, ah, that reminds me.” Nezu pushes his tea to the side and opens up one of his desk drawers to pull out a few papers. “What is our motto again? I haven’t heard it from you in a while, Aizawa.”

Sometimes Shouta does seriously consider murder.

“Plus ultra,” he grits out, staring straight ahead.

“Indeed! It is our duty to help this child along and nourish his power to the fullest—and even beyond that point! With a mind and emotional intelligence as grand as his, Midoriya will surely be an unstoppable force in the future.” Nezu holds up a claw. “But only if given the right push.”

The right push in the wrong direction, he means.

Shouta stays silent again, stewing. He can’t believe this, but he also can, because *fuck,* he knew there’d be a catch. He knew that his boss would have some strings attached in allowing the kid to hide here and not be sent away. He just knew it wouldn’t be so easy.

He’s grateful, sure, since there’s no way in hell he would be able to protect Midoriya legally and maybe even *physically* without Nezu’s help and support, but he’s still pissed. Because the mammal is acting like Midoriya is nothing but a toy that he can play with and ruin and eventually throw out once he gets bored of it.

Shouta has seen it happen before.

“And speaking of his intelligence! I wanted to discuss the details of Midoriya’s test with you, if that’s alright? I’m quite pleased with what I’ve found.”

The IQ test? Is he still stuck on that?

“He wasn’t very happy about taking it, you know,” Shouta grumbles, crossing his arms and leaning back in the sofa directly adjacent to Nezu’s desk. He’s annoyed by the change of topic but also not willing to try and bring up the rat’s selfish tendencies again.

Nezu nods. “I imagine not. He must’ve known why I was pushing for his cooperation with it. But, as I’m sure you told him, to get every question wrong you have to first know every right answer. So if I’m to be honest, he didn’t need to take that second test. I just wanted to see

how he would do on a slightly more advanced version." Something dark passes across his furry face, making the hairs at the back of Shouta's neck stand up. "And he didn't disappoint."

"We already knew he was smart. He's one of the top students in my class. What do you want?"

"I think if I were to tutor him personally—"

"No."

"You should understand I wasn't asking your permission," the principal says sweetly.

Shouta's eye twitches, the fire reigniting in his stomach once more. "I told you he's not going to become one of your newest *projects.* He's not some tool you can train to your liking and use whenever you feel like it. That's cruel."

"He is a hero in training, so he's already a tool. Do not forget that this is exactly what Midoriya signed up for upon turning in his application. But I will assure you, Aizawa, that he will remain in good hands. I merely want to help him expand his knowledge beyond what he believes is possible."

That's the biggest load of shit Shouta's ever heard, but he can't do anything about it. He's witnessed this happen more times than he'd prefer. And each time he was unsuccessful to change the outcome whenever he tried.

He gets up with his head dipped low, making for the door. He trusts Nezu, he really does. But sometimes it scares Shouta how much his boss refuses to *understand.* But that's not quite right either, is it? Nezu does understand, he just thinks that some things—mainly his projects—are more important than anything else.

"Ah, one more thing before you go!"

Shouta's hand pauses on the handle. It's too cold for his liking.

"Would you mind sending Midoriya to my office sometime over the next few days? I think I should introduce myself formally, as I have yet to do so." He shakes his head in slight shame. "How rude of me. I *am* the closest thing to his legal guardian as of this moment. You would think I'd have seen him by now."

It's almost a jab towards Shouta himself; another stinging reminder that Midoriya still isn't under his or Hizashi's guardianship despite their living situation. Which means Shouta doesn't have any legal precedence when it comes to Midoriya—Nezu can do whatever he wants to him. He can also decide to revoke the protection the boy's receiving whenever he feels like it. He wouldn't need a reason.

Shouta hasn't exactly told Midoriya that the mammal is his guardian. That's something that he'll have to do very soon, as much as he resents the fact. It's stupid, really, how even though Shouta and Hizashi are the caretakers, the ones who the kid will go back to every day after school and stay with like they're fostering him, Nezu is still his highest authority figure since Midoriya now belongs to UA. They have to wait for the grace period to be up before they can take things a step further and fully adopt the kid. It would be easier to protect him that way.

Even if the mere idea of adoption makes Shouta's heart race and his palms sweat. It's much too early for that. It's too early for *any* of that stuff.

The kid won't like any of this, he knows. He has to prepare for a nasty reaction.

He turns back and stares at the animal, who's taken to looking out the window now, watching the dark clouds above light up with electricity. His face is shadowed as he thinks of things Shouta isn't privy to.

There's a reason I haven't let you see him yet, Nezu. You know that.

The mammal wants to push Midoriya over the edge of the precipice and into the roaring waters down below. He wants to watch Midoriya struggle to stay afloat until he's about to succumb to the darkness, and only then will Nezu fish him from the waves. He'll wring him out and repeat the process until Midoriya learns how to do it all by himself, until he won't need anyone to save him from the chilling waters. And when that happens, what will be left is something raw and malleable. Something stronger and yet *worse* than before.

This is exactly what Nezu has been looking for in all of UA's students. And it looks like he's found it, finally. He's found the perfect subject.

Shouta hates that it's Midoriya, and yet he always knew it would be like that. The kid just has a way of drawing people towards him. Even criminals. He manages to worm his way into people's lives and hearts without them even knowing it until one night they just find

themselves running into a burning building to snatch him off death's doorstep.

Maybe that's the moment Shouta knew things were going to change.

"You'll break him," he says in warning, taking a shuddering breath in at the same time as thunder rumbles overhead. "But you know that, don't you?"

Just like all the other ones who failed to meet his expectations in the end.

Nezu doesn't reply immediately. He rarely does in instances where he's challenged so openly about his methods. But then one of his ears twitches, and he twists to present Shouta with what is probably meant to be a comforting smile; it's too resigned and sad to ever be that soft.

"Only if he's breakable. And from what I've seen, Aizawa, he is anything but."

His words are final, signaling the end of the conversation, but his tone is almost soft. Protective. More thoughts and memories pass through his eyes like ships in the sea, and Shouta leaves with a heavy feeling in his chest.

Children shouldn't have to be unbreakable, he thinks. They should just be safe.

But the world doesn't work that way. Shouta knows this. They *all* know this.

The sun is peeking ever so slightly through the black clouds, and Shouta lets the warmth of it shine through the windows and wash over his face as he walks. For a day as shitty as this one, it feels kinda nice. He tucks his face into his capture weapon and bites back a yawn. It's only halfway through the day and he's already tired of this shit. Maybe he should've taken another day off or something.

But speaking of. Where *is* the little shit? Off terrorizing one of the teachers, probably, as he should still have a couple minutes of lunch left. He hopes at least someone is watching him; he doubts Midoriya actually stayed in the teacher's lounge like he asked.

He doesn't want to deal with another spray painting scenario. That wouldn't be good, especially because he knows that instead of punishing Midoriya, Nezu will punish *Shouta* for it the next time it

happens. Maybe he'll make him play another game of chess with him.

Shouta would much sooner step off a skyscraper than do that. At least then he would have a better chance at surviving.

He's so busy in his thoughts that he doesn't even notice someone is coming around the corner until it's too late. A body smacks into Shouta's chest with so much force that the culprit ends up flat on his ass, a few papers fluttering out of thin arms as a consequence.

And Shouta, who didn't move an inch at the collision, just blinks down at the boy. His eyes immediately go to the circles on the uniform that show he's a student in general studies, and he watches as the kid scrambles to his feet after picking up his papers. He gets the feeling he's seen him before but can't figure out where it might've been from.

"Shit, sorry, I wasn't looking where I was..." Mystery Boy trails off upon meeting Shouta's gaze, eyes widening a little. His mouth hangs open in shock—and he's still standing in Shouta's way, which makes the hero want to sigh *again.*

He walks right past him, cataloging the fluffy lilac hair to memory so later he can try to remember why the kid is so familiar. "It's fine. Go back to lunch, kid."

Those eyes are familiar, too. And his voice.

No matter. It doesn't concern Shouta.

"Wait! Sir, I—I have a question!"

"I'm busy." Shouta doesn't slow down. "If you have questions, talk to your teacher or one of the counselors, I'm not—"

"You're Eraserhead, right?"

Shouta only just barely manages to stop himself from outwardly huffing at the interruption. He really doesn't have time for this. He quickens his steps and hears the boy scampering along after him. "This isn't the time for whatever you're trying to do."

"You transferred from general studies!"

Shouta's mind short circuits, making him stop abruptly. The student smashes into Shouta's back and hisses, clutching at his nose as he

stumbles away, but Shouta can't pay his misfortune any mind.

Transferred? Is he talking about how Shouta was moved from Gen Ed. to the hero course? And if so, just *how* does he even know that? Not many people do. Shouta only did well on his first sports festival so he would be considered for the hero course. He purposely flunked the last trials of his second and third year festivals so he wouldn't get any unwanted recognition.

But Shouta transferred midway through his first year almost sixteen years ago, so how is it that it's being brought up now? Nobody was supposed to remember the weird-looking kid who wiped the floor with the hero course students that one year. It was supposed to be a fluke.

But now that he's thinking about it, he knows who this boy is. The pieces are coming back to him. This is the one who made it through the obstacle course and the paintball battle without any trouble during the festival . This is the one who fought Midoriya in the first round of the duels. How could Shouta forget?

It's not often a kid with a powerful quirk and an attitude like this comes along.

Fucking hell. Yeah. He definitely needs more coffee for this. Immediately, preferably.

Shouta starts walking again, not bothering to turn around. "And how is that relevant to you, kid?"

He knows the answer. He just needs to hear it. He had a feeling something like this would happen sooner or later; he was *expecting* it to happen once he watched that fight at the festival.

Shinsou Hitoshi must have done a lot of research to come to Shouta for help and advice. Things must've been made difficult once Shouta had to stay away from work for a week, which means the kid was *waiting* for him to come back to UA.

"I want to get into the hero course," he hears from behind him, "just like you did!"

He hums, uninterested. Shinsou doesn't seem satisfied with his lack of a real answer, though, as he starts to babble on to fill the silence, his borderline *desperate* words giving Shouta a headache. He's trying to get him to understand, it seems, but it's like talking to a brick wall,

because Shouta already *knows,* dammit.

It's not going to happen. Not at the rate Shinsou is at. It's not feasible at this very moment. He knows—he's read through his file multiple times. During the sports festival, too.

You can't just wish for something to happen, and you can't just ask for it either. That's not how it works for people like us.

The path he's wanting to take isn't going to be an easy one. Shinsou will have to fight for it every step of the way, and none of it will be desirable. It might not even seem like it'll be worth it while enduring it all. But he knows this, Shouta is sure.

Shinsou wouldn't have sought him out if he didn't already think it over long and hard. But Shouta just needs to make sure.

"Forget about it," he says, cutting him off. "It's nearly impossible to transfer nowadays."

Especially with a mental quirk like yours. As powerful as it is, it won't be enough against any number of people. It's easy to counter, as Midoriya showed at the festival. You'll need something more.

There's the hitch of breath behind him, but Shouta doesn't stop. Can't afford to.

There's no rebuttal, no disbelief or defiance. Not even a *but.* He stops himself from looking back, instead keeping his gaze straight ahead, hands in his pockets as he walks. The silence feels almost like acceptance, and Shouta hates it.

He really does sigh this time. *Another dud.*

He's just about to make the turn for the teacher's lounge when it happens.

"Forget about it?" It's a whisper, but it's shaky and low. *Angry.*

Shouta pauses, waiting.

"No." The kid's voice rises a little in volume. "I'm not gonna stop. I—I can't. I want—*need* to prove I can do it. I want to help people, just like you do. I want to save! And I need to prove that people like me can do the same things as everyone else, if not do them *better."* When he continues, it's much quieter than before. Shouta has to strain to hear

him. “And if I can rub it in all their faces in the process, that’d be good too.”

Need to?

Shinsou fills in Shouta’s silence, more defensive this time. “Isn’t that why *you* did it? You wanted to prove yourself back then, right? So why can’t I? You can’t be the only one!”

No. Shouta isn’t the only one to have transferred into the hero course from one of the other departments. But he can count the number of others who have on one hand, and even still, he hasn’t seen it happen yet in his years of teaching here.

So why can’t I?

Shouta snorts despite himself. He shakes his head and turns to truly look at Shinsou. He’s got the same look on his face as Shouta did back then. But maybe it’s just a little more bitter than he remembers. There’s definitely a hunger there—a need, just as he said.

He wants to do good and change things for the better, and being a hero is how he plans to do that.

Shinsou is scrawny, but he’s pretty tall. There’s room for growth on those shoulders of his, Shouta can tell. His potential isn’t zero. Because of his quirk’s limitations, he’ll have to make sure to train his body even harder to keep up with everyone else, just as Shouta had to, but other than that? He would be a force to reckon with on the field.

There’s a light in the kid’s eyes now. It’s almost as if he’s surprised at the prospect of being seen and heard. At the possibility of being extended a hand. He’d probably do fine without that hand, Shouta thinks absentmindedly, but what’s the harm in giving him a little help? Shouta himself would’ve been so much better off with someone guiding him. He wouldn’t have been so clueless and *reckless* in his beginning years.

For the second time that day, Shouta finds himself cursing Nezu’s name for how unfair he purposefully makes things for others.

He blinks back to himself, ignoring the way the vents above cause Shinsou’s hair to move like purple waves in an ocean. He just has to make sure the kid knows what he’s getting into before he goes any further. Because if Shinsou really does get into this and starts to train like hell, only to fail halfway through without making it anywhere… it

would be cruel. It would be crushing.

But it wouldn't be the first time Shouta has witnessed something like that happening.

"Do you really think you have what it takes to be a hero?"

The question takes Shinsou by surprise, and he hesitates. Shouta is about to walk off again when the teen replies with haste: "Yes! I... I have to be a hero. It's what I've been wanting for a while. I know I'm not the strongest out there, and I'll already be behind the hero students, but... I'm not what everyone says I am."

Huh. Interesting.

Shouta can hear the desperation in his voice as clear as day. It's like he has a *duty* to prove his worth to both himself and to others, like he has no other choice. Like he wouldn't be able to fathom any other way of existing.

And maybe he can't.

It's such an achingly familiar conversation that Shouta finds himself wishing for a jelly pack, the decision having already been made. He looks down at the student before him and beckons him into the teacher's lounge. "Come on, but I'm not writing you a late pass."

The boy's eyes nearly bug out of his head in surprise, and he quickly slips inside at Shouta's second, this time more impatient hand gesture. He still looks shocked, which makes Shouta quirk a brow.

He really is too tired for this shit. He needed to catch up on his late work and then maybe get a nice nap in before his next class, but that plan is gone now. He wouldn't want it any other way, though.

Shinsou's face lights up in faint excitement as their conversation continues, that starry-eyed expression of his not flickering out even once as strict schedules and dates are thrown his way, and Shouta suddenly feels less unsure about everything.

He can already tell this kid is going to be good for the world, too.

It doesn't really occur to Izuku that he actually lives with his teachers until the last bell rings and all of the students start to pack up to go home.

He gets up from his seat at the same time as everyone else, slipping the straps of his new backpack over his shoulders and shoving his notebook inside his jacket pocket—only for the realization to set in and make him freeze awkwardly, brows furrowed as he questions himself.

Normally he would do two things after school: run straight to another part of the city for one of his missions or jobs, or just walk with Kacchan to the house and maybe stay a little bit as an excuse to eat Auntie's food. More often than not it was the first one.

But now he can't do either of those. The first for obvious reasons and the second because Izuku isn't entirely sure Aizawa would let him go home with Kacchan. Not yet, at least.

It's not like Izuku can go back to his own place, either. He is, essentially, *stuck* here. And it's a weird thing, really. Now he has to rely on people to take him places. He has to *allow* them to help him. He can't just go out on his own or be reckless anymore.

And maybe, just maybe that part isn't so bad. Living alone, Izuku was constantly exhausted and drained. But now? He hasn't felt this good in a long time, despite everything.

So maybe it's nice. Maybe it's nice to finally be able to break that cycle and be able to let someone else do the worrying and planning for once.

He finds that he doesn't mind it nearly as much as he would've just a few months ago.

"Your smile's changing."

Izuku blinks at the suddenness of it, and he turns to see Kacchan hanging back a little ways away from the departing crowd. "What?"

"Your smile," he says, still just as quiet as before. "It's not the same."

Why does he look embarrassed when he says that?

Izuku tips his head to one side, freckles partially hidden by locks of bushy hair. He didn't even realize he was smiling before his friend pointed it out. "Is that a good or a bad thing?"

Kacchan huffs, looking away, but Izuku can see the glimmer in his eyes. The *relief* that stretches across his face, akin to a warrior seeing the faintest rays of sunshine after a hard night of fighting and mourning.

He looks hopeful.

"We'll see," is all he says, making Izuku laugh. He wonders if that's changed, too.

And maybe that wouldn't be the worst thing.

Kacchan leaves after making him promise to call him sometime tonight, and then Izuku is stuck waiting in the classroom after everyone else has filed out. Aizawa looks about ready to fall over with exhaustion, making Izuku wonder if he had to deal with a lot today as well.

It's not long before Yamada comes bursting in with the car keys in his hand and a wide grin on his face. He must've had a blast today, unlike his husband.

"Alright, alright! Let's get going, y'all! We're leaving *early* today!"

Izuku wants to ask why he considers this early, as this is the end of the school day, before he realizes with a sigh that teachers don't always leave when the students do. They still have work to get done before they can leave, which means that in the upcoming days Izuku is probably going to have to stay after school for a while, too.

Which is bad for Izuku since he's going to be leaving Missy alone for longer than she likes, but also bad for *them* since the extra time can give him more time to explore and test some of UA's precautions. There are a few second and third year training gyms that Izuku isn't allowed in, so obviously he's going to explore those areas first whenever he gets the chance.

"C'mon, kiddo! You wanna help me with dinner tonight? I was thinking of making shrimp tempura rolls , how does that sound?"

The voice hero starts them off toward the back entrance, still talking excitedly, and Izuku notices Aizawa trailing after them at a slower

pace. He looks to still be stuck in thought, but Izuku pays it no mind and just turns his head back to assure Yamada that he's not, in fact, allergic to shellfish.

He might not like the food that much, but he's not allergic. And if Yamada's making it, he won't mind trying it.

His teacher just has a way with cooking. He'd get along well with Mitsuki and Ms. Hanako, probably.

The thought makes Izuku a lot sadder than it should for some reason.

"Am I still allowed to go out on Friday?" Izuku asks abruptly on the car ride back to the apartment. The storm from earlier has started up again, coming back with a vengeance. It was quiet during the second half of the day, but of course that wouldn't last.

The boy sees Aizawa glance at him out of the corner of his eye, and it takes all of his willpower not to look away when he meets that piercing gaze. What he really wants to ask is *will you still let me patrol like you promised? Did I lose that chance because of what I did that night?*

He hasn't been punished yet, is the thing. He did something bad, he fucked up, and he still hasn't been punished for running. They barely even *lectured* him, so something has to give way eventually, right? He's not going to just *get away* with it. And Aizawa retracting the promise he made that day sounds like a good form of punishment, at least to Izuku.

His patrols are one of the only things he can see being leveraged over him, and that's only because those hobbies of his are still technically illegal. They don't have to allow him any of that, which is why it physically hurts Izuku every time he thinks of Rabbit now.

Because if the answer here is *no,* if the answer here is *you lost that chance forever, kid,* Izuku wouldn't know what to do.

He would have to choose. Most likely between this—Yamada and Aizawa and Missy and UA and *safety*— and Rabbit.

Some faraway part of him argues that Rabbit means safety, too, and Izuku is inclined to agree.

"The internships start up after this week, which gives us a short time frame." Aizawa's voice is cool. Almost careful. "But we can do a sweep of the city if you want. Just for a couple of hours."

Izuku startles. “You’re going with me?”

“Yes,” the hero says without hesitation, and that’s how Izuku knows that part isn’t up for debate. Shit.

He scrunches up his nose but doesn’t argue. That should’ve been expected, really, and yet it annoys him all the same. *Of course he wouldn’t let you go by yourself, dumbass. The one time he left you alone for five minutes you took off and got yourself caught by a top hero. Doesn’t that just scream how independent and responsible you are?*

Izuku doesn’t know why he accepts the condition so easily. Maybe because Yamada is in the car as well and most assuredly listening, even as he drums his fingers on the steering wheel and hums a quiet tune, or maybe it’s because he really is just too emotionally tired to debate with Aizawa, but whatever.

Today was the first day back for him since the Sports Festival , and he thinks it went pretty alright. Better than he was expecting.

Kacchan doesn’t hate him. His classmates didn’t press him too much. *Yagi* isn’t disappointed in him, at least not anymore. Hell, he even had a blast annoying Aizawa and the rest of the teachers! So really, things are *okay* at the moment. He’s alright.

This feeling of just *not* being stressed is new to him. He’s rarely had the luxury of being able to just sit and think over things.

The only thing he has to figure out now is what to do about Stain. He can’t just let the vigilante continue his work. He’s done that before, and he regrets every moment of it.

He can’t continue to make that mistake. He won’t let himself do it.

Izuku knows where Stain likes to strike, and he knows his patterns. If anybody can predict where he’s going next, it’ll be Izuku. He might be able to track him down and talk. Or, if it comes to it, fight him.

The boy will probably spectacularly lose against him, just as he’s always done, but this time he could maybe tip off the police right beforehand so he could have some backup.

He could help, you know. With his quirk, the fight would be much easier.

Izuku furrows his brows and looks out the window again, watching the rain from the storm pitter-patter against the glass. This is a

different voice than he's used to. This one sounds softer.

No, he thinks back. *I'm not letting Aizawa anywhere near Stain. That's a recipe for disaster.*

It would be a nightmare coming to life.

You're scared Stain might not like him.

Okay, Izuku's not even going to bother replying to that one. That's a stupid, *stupid* thing to say. Izuku is trying to figure out the best way to take Stain in—he's not trying to plan a meet-and-greet between his old mentor and his new one!

If that were the case, Izuku would do it with All Might instead. The death rate of that meeting would be *significantly* less than the potential death rate of the one with Aizawa.

Izuku shudders just thinking of both men meeting each other. He wonders what would happen, if Stain would consider Aizawa to be generally not worth killing, or if he'd hurt him simply because of what he stands for. He knows Aizawa certainly wouldn't give the other a chance to speak once he recognizes him; he'd go straight to trying to detain him.

And everyone knows how that would end.

Yep. Definitely not letting them meet.

He was planning on using Friday night to go search for Stain, but that plan has now been thrown into the gutter now that he knows for sure Aizawa is going to be following him.

Maybe he can persuade the man not to come on Friday night by being extra civilized and well-behaved for the rest of the week, though he doubts that'll work. Aizawa would just get suspicious.

He'll just have to work around it then. Finding Stain can come at another time. There's no other choice at the moment.

More thunder rumbles in the distance, lighting up the sky with dark flashes of blue. Izuku is suddenly reminded of the look on Iida's face when he walked into class this morning. He remembers that determined glint in his eye when he talked to Izuku—the edge to those usually polite words—and he knows he has to get to Stain before anyone else does.

Izuku is always up for a challenge, but he thinks briefly that this might be the hardest one yet.

Chapter End Notes

when he imagines himself, he's always running. he couldn't draw his own face if the stars asked

I rlly like this song on yt. really gives me lonely night izuku vibes. (I was very tempted to have his hero name be bunny shsnmgkd next chap we have parent teacher conferences and internship decisions!!!)

h

recipe for survival

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For how much time Ms. Kayama and Yamada have spent showing him how to do makeup, Izuku just can't seem to get it right.

To be fair, they've only shown him about two hundred times now how to do the perfect wing to go with his eye shape, so Izuku can't be too harsh on himself, but still.

He has his face pressed up almost completely against the mirror while he drags the liquid eyeliner across his waterline. Which is probably not the best idea, using liquid eyeliner. Ms. Kayama recommended trying pencil eyeliners first so he can learn how to properly do things, but Izuku has never been one to go for the easy route.

Not that Izuku had any luck with the pencil eyeliners either. He keeps ending up looking like The Winter Soldier after a hard day's work of assassinating politicians.

Izuku rarely gives up, though, so here he is in the boy's locker room at school, thirty minutes before homeroom is supposed to start.

He's playing around, in all honesty. He just got out of the shower and has his hair wrapped up in a towel—something that he's never really done before. He usually just lets it air dry and prays that his hair will magically untangle itself.

(Izuku has lost too many expensive brushes to his hair. It's tragic, really.)

Ms. Kayama said that he has beautiful long lashes, so mascara would look just perfect on him. She even gave him a bottle of her own supply for him to try. While he's not sure how to apply it to his bottom lashes without getting it on his cheek, he thinks that he actually might like it!

It brings more attention to his eyes rather than to the other imperfections on his skin and body.

And as for those imperfections…

Izuku stares at the tube of concealer in his hand, brows furrowing. He used to wear foundation a lot when he was younger to hide the bruising on his face before going outside, but he stopped doing that sometime before being accepted into UA. As Rabbit, he got better at fighting and only rarely got hit in the face, so he stopped needing it.

But now he has something more permanent on his face that he might want to cover up.

He glares at the thin white scar on his jaw, contemplating. He got it because of the fire, and his friends have most definitely noticed it sometime during the past two days already, but still. He's grateful none of them have said anything about it, as surprising as that was, but he just doesn't like the way they stare at it. They don't mean to do it, he's sure—it just happens sometimes in the middle of conversations, but what if they do decide to ask eventually? What then?

It might be better to cover it up, both for them and his own conscience. Out of sight, out of mind, right?

But just as he's twisting off the cap to the concealer, the door to the locker room opens quietly, followed by the sound of familiar footsteps —and *shit,* Izuku has never dropped something so fast in his goddamn life.

He has to swallow back a panicked yelp when he recognizes the quirk of the person approaching, and he shoves the makeup back into the small bag Yamada gifted him, slipping as he tries to get out of sight.

There are stalls he can hide in instead of just standing right by the mirror next to his locker—

He slips in the water puddling by his own feet, because of *course* he does. That's just his luck. He forgot he got out of the shower just a few minutes prior to this, which is weird since he's half naked with nothing but an All Might towel wrapped around his waist.

The cold draft up his towel should have reminded him.

Hitting the ground hard, Izuku puts a hand on his hair to make sure the towel didn't loosen and grabs the one on his waist for the same reason—but now the problem presents itself.

With no free hands, how is he supposed to get up and run? And how is he supposed to grab the makeup bag he dropped on the floor?

Izuku has less than five seconds to decide on what to do before he gets seen by his classmate, who is walking around the corner as he thinks, so he does the one thing anyone else would do in this situation—he lets go of the towel drying his hair, hoping that it won't actually unravel, and grabs the makeup bag before running.

Well. Tries to. Because the towel *does* end up sliding off his hair due to his movements, tangling on both his legs to make him stumble.

He curses when he lands on his knees, face planting into the ground. Fuck. That hurts. His nose fucking *hurts*.

He's going to sue Principal Nezu for this. There should've been a Wet Floor sign!

Why must the tile on the floor be so hard, too? There should be carpet in here. A little wet carpet won't hurt anybody!

Footsteps come to a halt right behind him. "Midoriya?"

Izuku, who is suddenly very aware that he's just showing off his ass, scrambles to his feet. "Ah, Todoroki!" He spins around, beyond embarrassed but trying to hide it. "What are you doing here? School doesn't start for another half hour!"

Todoroki blinks at him, voice giving nothing away, and it's only then that Izuku sees the towel and fresh uniform in his hand. "I woke up early, so I decided to prepare for class at school. Why are *you* here?"

His eyes trail down lower, and Izuku is confused about what's so interesting before he follows his gaze.

The scar on Izuku's abdomen is on full display.

Usually, he has a tight undershirt on to make sure nobody can see it if something happens to his regular shirt, but he thought he would be alone in the locker room, so he didn't bother putting one on immediately after his shower.

Panic, so thick and hot and cloying, jumps in his throat, and Izuku immediately wraps his arms across his stomach to try and cover it—as if that would erase Todoroki's memory.

He starts to back away a little, shame making his skin burn for a different reason as Todoroki meets his eyes again. "Oh, the same reason as you! I just—the showers here are better than the one at my

house, so yeah!" Another step and Izuku's back collides with the corner of the wall. "I'll leave you to your stuff now! Have fun!"

To say he flees would be an understatement; Izuku fucking *disappears* with how fast he darts around the corner to go into one of the stalls.

Have fun? He hisses to himself when he sits on a toilet and closes the door, smacking his cheeks with his palms. *He's just taking a shower, not going to an amusement park! Idiot.*

He quickly wipes off his poor attempts at eyeliner in a fit of rage, and he sits there for a moment, processing just how dumb he is.

It doesn't help that just a few moments later he goes to put on his own uniform—only to realize he left it in his locker.

Fuck.

Resigning himself to his fate, Izuku waits until he hears one of the showers being turned on before running to snatch his clothes quickly. It takes him just over four seconds to put everything on, and he doesn't bother with the tie—Vlad King will have to deal. He hates it when Izuku doesn't wear his tie properly.

Before learning of Vlad King's distaste of unkempt uniforms, Izuku just didn't care enough to tie it, as he was forced to learn many kinds of knots as a child in order to always look presentable… but now that he knows he can annoy someone too by not doing it? Good luck ever seeing him with a well-done tie or bow.

He shoves his towels and makeup bag in his locker and quickly jumps up into the vents, not wanting to eavesdrop on Todoroki any longer.

If he tells anyone that the boy actually sings quietly to himself in the shower, the world might just crumble.

Todoroki brings it up at lunch, which should be a crime.

Not the singing, though Izuku wishes that's what the conversation could be about. He wants to ask when the album is dropping but figures that wouldn't be polite.

The day before, on Tuesday, Izuku invited Todoroki over to their lunch table. He wouldn't accept his refusal, either. He practically dragged him over with Kacchan's help.

So now this is the second day they're eating together, and it's strangely nice. Todoroki is quiet as he eats, but he does make light conversation when he feels his input is needed.

His voice makes Izuku warm. It also doesn't help that Izuku could stare at him for hours and never get bored. His eyes are striking.

"Does it hurt?" is what he asks, and Izuku feels pretty dumb until he realizes what Todoroki is referring to.

Uneasiness settles at the pit of his stomach like a snake. Kacchan is sitting at Kirishima's table today, so he won't be able to save him, and Iida and Uraraka are engaged in one of their own conversations.

They're not listening, which is good. But he still can't help but be hesitant. "Does what hurt?" He shoves a piece of fried fish into his mouth. *Take the hint. Please play dumb, Todo.*

"Your scar," Todoroki says bluntly, now staring right at him in something that looks like concern. It may also be confusion and a bit of anger. Izuku is too busy scarfing down his lunch as quickly as possible to look into it.

"Does yours?" He says, trying to match his bluntness, only to wince immediately after he does it.

Todoroki stares down at his food too. "No. But it itches sometimes."

Izuku looks up to stare at the side of his face. He figured a scar that size would itch, but to not even hurt at all? He didn't expect that. Maybe it's because of how old Todoroki's is. The one on Izuku's abdomen is, what, a year old now? Just about. Maybe that's what's different.

He goes back to staring at his food, chewing thoughtfully. Aizawa must've prepared it today, as Izuku knows Yamada doesn't approve of jelly packs at lunch.

Though the new flavor Izuku is currently slurping down is delectable. He might have to ask Aizawa if they can get more secretly.

"How did you get it?" Todoroki asks abruptly, and Izuku forces his

expression not to drop.

He wonders why he's interested in it in the first place, as it's just a scar. It's not important. But this is also the most Izuku has ever talked with Todoroki in one sitting since the Sports Festival, so he doesn't want to take any chances that'll potentially mess this up. He likes talking with him. A lot.

He's just calming, even though his quirk feels like it's boiling most of the time.

Izuku shouldn't lie to him.

"A bullet," he says, maybe a little too cheerfully, and Todoroki blinks.

"Oh." As always, his face gives nothing away. Izuku wishes he could see more of his emotions sometimes so he'd be able to gauge how he should act around him.

Maybe that's part of the reason why Todoroki allures him so much. He's interesting. Though it could also be the expensive cologne, too.

Izuku likes rich stuff.

"I have lotions that help soothe scars," Todoroki says suddenly. "My father has plenty, so I'll bring you a few bottles. It might help."

What? Izuku is so shocked by the gesture that he can't even come up with something to say at first. He sets down his chopsticks, about to say he doesn't have to do that, holy *shit, Todoroki,* but the other boy tips his head and speaks again.

"Midoriya, I noticed it this morning… you use a towel with your father's face on it?"

Izuku promptly chokes.

Stumped is a fun word to say. It reminds Izuku of large trees in the middle of nowhere, of stars peeking brightly through canopies of leaves. He doesn't know quite why, but it does.

So yeah. Stumped is a pretty cool word, right up until you find yourself in a situation where you're *actually* stumped.

Izuku glares at the chessboard in front of him, one hand gripping his pants in frustration and the other holding up his chin. This is getting to be stupid now.

He's losing. He can tell.

It's been a couple days of back-and-forth Chess playing. It started on Monday and only evolved from there. Izuku will come in the morning and move his piece, and when he comes back less than an hour later between classes, another piece on the opposing side will be moved.

This is their third game. Izuku's opponent moves quickly, and usually Izuku could say the same thing about himself, but right now he's moving slower than a turtle.

He just can't see a way out of this one.

Izuku takes his trusty pawn and moves it to the only viable place, but he hesitates in letting it go. He doesn't want to see it gone, even though there really is no choice.

For a second, Izuku eyes the cup of hot tea his opponent keeps leaving him, staring at the small chip on the top as he thinks. He never drinks it, but it makes for a good background to focus on while he goes through his internal struggles.

He moves his pawn to another spot and holds it there, cringing even more at the choice. Shit. It's a slightly better decision than the last, but it's still crappy.

"I wouldn't recommend that."

Izuku doesn't flinch. He felt him coming ten seconds ago. He's also too irritated with himself to care that much. "You trapped me," he mutters to himself.

"There are still ways for you to win," Principal Nezu reminds, and Izuku's eye twitches.

"I know, but I'd still be losing my piece."

"It's just a pawn," he soothes, sitting on his cushion politely. He takes a whole tea kettle out of nowhere and pours himself his own cup of

tea. Izuku ignores it when he pours a little more into the untouched one.

“Yeah, but it’s the same pawn I’ve stuck to since the beginning. I can’t lose it now.”

“If you are so attached, there are two more pawns for you to use. They’ve been trapped in their places for three turns now. I’d be happy to take one of them instead.”

You fucker.

“You shouldn’t trade lives,” Izuku says suddenly, eyes not leaving the piece.

Nezu is quiet as he sips his tea. Izuku hates him already, and this is only the first time he’s seen the mammal face-to-face. “Sometimes,” he says, voice not wavering, “we have no choice.”

He is patient as Izuku runs through all the mistakes he’s made leading up to now. The boy thinks about how he could’ve prevented this, and then he thinks of any and all possible options he has left. He could maybe use one of his other pieces as bait and hope Nezu leaves his pawn alone, but he knows he won’t.

Dammit. Izuku breathes out and lets the pawn go, watching with disappointed eyes as Nezu leans forward to take it.

Izuku accepts the small defeat quietly and continues playing with the stoat. He’s not too interested in this game anymore. Every move of Izuku’s is usually planned out and expected, as is every time his pieces are taken, but this time wasn’t planned.

He was caught off guard, so to Izuku the entire game has already been lost.

It’s Thursday, the day of the parent-teacher conferences. He’s currently supposed to be in homeroom, but Aizawa was being a bigger ass than usual this morning, so Izuku decided to *accidentally* get lost in the vents for the entirety of that period and then some.

UA is a big place, can you blame him?

Sure, Izuku was also being a bit of a handful this morning, but he still maintains that he was completely innocent and without fault in the argument he had with Aizawa. Izuku had himself 100% under control

and was being 90% respectful right up until Aizawa called him *childish*.

That's when Izuku decided to be even back with him, which resulted in Aizawa getting pissed and then *Izuku* getting pissed… Yeah. It wasn't a fun time. Especially since the argument only sort of ended because of Yamada's interference. The man stressed that maybe they should both apologize to each other and be a little more compassionate.

Aizawa eventually apologized, as surprising as that is. Izuku refused to, as he still wasn't over the *childish* remark, and thus the bickering started right back up.

So overall it was a great start to the day! The car ride was silent on the way to school, and it felt so *wrong* that Izuku was really close to just opening the door and jumping in front of one of the oncoming trucks.

Izuku was being a little petty—he knows this, but he just couldn't bring himself to apologize to the man. Not then.

He's been feeling on edge since yesterday for some unknown reason. He knows that whenever he gets like this he tends to be a little sharp around the edges and short-tempered, but he didn't think it would be a problem, really.

Except he forgot how hard it is to be living with other people in the house. At his apartment, Izuku was living alone and never really had to keep himself in check like that whenever he got 'moody,' as there was no one *for* him to get mad at, but now things are different. And he tried to not be so upset this morning, he truly did. But there's just something about being called childish when he is anything *but* that grinds Izuku's nerves.

Okay, yeah, so maybe Izuku isn't completely faultless. Maybe the fault is actually 100% on him.

It didn't help that Izuku's emotions were already all over the place after working up the courage to call Mitsuki last night. He told his aunt he was staying with one of his teachers—his homeroom teacher, to be exact. After thinking about what Kacchan said that day, he realized that Auntie deserves to know. It wouldn't be fair to keep that hidden from her, especially since she would probably just find out anyways later on.

He told her that his father had another last minute *extended* stay in America, so he wouldn't be home for another couple months at least. He explained that Hisashi called the school and asked if it was possible for one of the staff members to check in on Izuku every once in a while, and UA instead just offered to house Izuku until his father could arrive back.

Which Izuku would like to think is an amazing excuse.

Auntie was glad he would finally be watched over by someone who's actually present in his life, but she also made sure to tell Izuku that if he ever wants to stay over, the Bakugou household will always be open to him. She would love for him to come if he ever doesn't want to stay with his teacher.

(Izuku was reminded once again that he doesn't deserve Auntie. Not in the slightest.)

He scratches at his jaw and stares as Nezu sets the board back up again. As predicted, Izuku lost the game. There's no surprises there. He lost the other two as well, but at least he got closer those other times.

Izuku made a stupid mistake this game. He won't make it in the future.

Principal Nezu doesn't start a new game once he's finished moving the last piece back into place. Instead, he moves the chess set off to the side and takes another polite sip of tea. "Do you know what time it is, Midoriya?"

Izuku's phone is set to vibrate every five minutes, and since it's been about four minutes and forty-seven seconds since the last time it did that, it's safe to guess that it's probably just after 8:59.

But it's not like Izuku is going to admit that he knows that. He's supposed to be lost right now. "I'm not sure, sir." He tips his head, eyes sliding up to finally look at the mammal. "Does your wristwatch not work?"

"I'm afraid the batteries have given all they can," Nezu explains with a small sigh, "and I have yet to get the chance to buy more."

As if to show proof, he angles the watch on his paw into what little light the vent hatch a couple yards away provides. Izuku can see that it's stuck on exactly six o'clock, something that doesn't really feel like

a coincidence.

Before he can respond, the bell marking the beginning of second period rings, and Izuku's heart sinks a little lower. He doesn't want to miss Yamada's class, but he also doesn't want to leave too quickly lest the stoat gets suspicious of something.

Nezu leans back in his cushion and fiddles with his own paws. Izuku wonders if he's wishing for a cigar right now.

"Midoriya, I see life as one large game of chess," the mammal begins, now looking right at him. Izuku reluctantly stares back. "Life and chess both have similar elements, don't you think? You have the difficult decision-making, the frustration, the quiet victories, and the consequence that is losing things that belong to you. Familiar, isn't it?"

Nezu presses a small button on the side of the chess board, something that Izuku spotted the second time he came here to continue playing, and a large hologram of the previous game lights up. It's a recording—or a fun reenactment, maybe, but seeing his own wrongdoings laid out in front of him again in real time makes Izuku want to leave. Immediately, preferably.

The video speeds up and switches to a bird's eye view of the game. Izuku can feel Nezu watching him intently as he scans the hologram to figure out exactly where he fucked up: the little move that set him on the wrong path six turns earlier, to be precise.

Izuku had a feeling it wouldn't end well then and he still did it. It was stupid for sure. He should've listened to himself.

When Izuku looks back down at his lap, Nezu lets out a soft hum. "I suppose the only difference between the two is that mistakes made here are far more trivial than those made in real life."

A flick of one claw, and the video changes to an actual recording. This one is from the Sports Festival, when Izuku used *Force* on Kacchan by accident and quite nearly sealed both their fates. He watches screen-Izuku peel himself up off the ground to stumble all the way over to his friend, the smoke following him like a cape.

His heart rate starts to pick up the more he watches, the more he sees Kacchan groggily try to push the medic bots away. The video changes, and Izuku sees the crumbled remains of his old apartment, his home. A warning poster with the Hero Killer's details and attributes flutters

down to the ground in front of the camera, and Izuku glares off to the side.

Of course life is a game. That's why Izuku keeps on losing.

"There are ways to avoid that flavor of hurt," Nezu says, as if reading his thoughts. "We just have to find that balance. We have to learn from our experiences and let those who truly understand us lend a paw. Only then will things begin to get easier as the burdens are shared."

Izuku leans back against the vent wall, wondering how and why Nezu is so knowledgeable on this. But then he remembers some of the more sensitive files he has on the mammal, the ones currently sealed away and scribbled all over in his notebook, and *Izuku* understands.

Nezu is extending that paw right now, isn't he? He's asking for his help in building the other half of the swaying bridge. *And why wouldn't he,* the sadder part of himself asks, the part that's still locked in his father's basement and crying for help where no one but the monsters can hear, *when we're one and the same?*

Stolen and raised to be exploited. They're just two things that shouldn't exist.

Huh. Next game Izuku will get him for sure. He knows it. He won't fail.

When Principal Nezu offers him the cracked cup for the second time to take with him on his way to class, Izuku accepts it.

He quite likes the way this mystery tea tastes.

There's something about conferences that always has Izuku on edge. Maybe it's the face-to-face conversations and lecturing that makes him uncomfortable, or maybe it's just the idea of having to sit there and listen to his wrongdoings and failures being spoken of aloud that does it.

Either way, Izuku is going to be avoiding this conference for as long as

possible. Hopefully Aizawa completely forgot about it, or maybe he won't even bother with it since, well, Izuku is *living* with him now.

The point of a parent-teacher conference is so the teacher can tell the parent everything that's going on, right? And since Izuku is kind of lacking in the parent department at the moment (forever), there's no need for one at all. Aizawa and Yamada are probably the closest things to caretakers, but as his teachers they should already *be* in the know.

So the point of this all is lost to Izuku. He should've been allowed to stay back at the apartment. This is a waste of his time.

After Principal Nezu welcomes all the parents and visitors and apologizes for having to push back the original date for the event, everyone is left to mingle and talk and explore the campus. The students were all given specific times for when their conference would start, so all things are orderly.

For now.

Izuku is going to ruin one thing tonight at least, mark his words.

He's planning to hide away in the vents or in Power Loader's off-limits experiment rooms when Uraraka suddenly grabs him by the arm from out of nowhere and tugs him over to meet her parents, where he tries to look as presentable as possible so as not to embarrass her.

And if Izuku makes a weird dying noise at the back of his throat when Uraraka introduces him as one of her best friends, no one has to know. It doesn't help when Mrs. Uraraka smiles softly at him and says that they've already heard a lot about him.

(Izuku must be levitating at this point, and not because of Uraraka's quirk.)

The Uraraka family is strangely chaotic but quiet, on a similar wavelength to the Bakugou family but not quite as *fiery*. They feel very… homely. Very down to earth.

But they're also determined. When Izuku tries to slip away, not wanting to bother them for too much longer, Mr. Uraraka asks him to accompany them on the tour of the school if he had the time.

And really, how was Izuku supposed to say no?

“Ooh, ooh! Deku, tell them what this one represents!” Uraraka excitedly bounces up and down once they reach the bigger part of UA’s main hallway, the part where all of the past years’ most memorable moments and awards are shown. “This one’s my favorite.”

Izuku dutifully whips out one of his mini notebooks and quickly flips to the page, sharing her enthusiasm. “That one is actually a really old one! In just his second year’s work study, Best Jeanist managed to save over fifty civilians and even his mentor during an impromptu battle with White Sun, a villain with a light manipulation quirk capable of permanently blinding or burning anyone fighting her.” Izuku glances at the two adults to see their reactions, and he continues brightly. “She was placed in Tartarus soon after, and the capture is one of UA’s highest achievements.”

The award itself is a small thing, but it’s shiny and was specially made by the Hero’s Commission to thank Hakamada.

“He’s the number four hero for a reason, huh?” Mr. Uraraka says, looking at all the awards in slight awe as they walk.

Mrs. Uraraka blinks. “I didn’t even know he went to UA.”

The best heroes did.

After another five minutes of exploring UA with Uraraka’s parents, Izuku sees Todoroki walking by himself, no Endeavor in sight. He looks lost in thought, almost troubled, so Izuku excuses himself quickly.

He has a feeling he might’ve come off as weird to the Uraraka family anyway.

“Hey, Todo!” He falls into step right beside him, beaming. The taller boy glances down at him, faint surprise coloring his features. “Are you alone, too?”

“He’s arriving late,” Todoroki explains, though it sounds like he’d rather Endeavor not show up at all. “He’ll be here in time for the conference and that’s all.”

Which makes sense. Endeavor isn’t a big fan of underground heroes, or anyone in general for that matter, so it’s unlikely he’d stay for any longer than needs be. The meeting with Aizawa, a pro hero who is supposed to be teaching his son how to be the *greatest,* is not going to go well, Izuku predicts. He wishes there were vents big enough to

eavesdrop through in the heroics class conference room. Witnessing that shitshow might just make this whole thing worth it.

Izuku hums and skips along happily, not faltering even when Todoroki tips his head and asks him a question.

“You asked if I was alone, too. Your parents aren’t coming?”

“Nope!” Izuku pops the *p* and glares at Monoma from far away when he sees the blond walking past and boasting loudly to his guardians. “They couldn’t make it tonight.”

Todoroki’s eyebrows pinch together. “But I saw All Might talking to Mic-sensei earlier.”

For a second, Izuku doesn’t know why that would matter, but then the voices in his head start to cackle as they always do when Izuku’s suffering increases, and he sighs in exasperation. “Todoroki, I keep telling you he’s not my dad. I’m serious!”

If you want to know my dad so badly, just look at All Might and think of all his personality traits and morals, and then think of the exact opposite. That should do it.

“Oh. Okay.” Todoroki’s voice doesn’t match with his words. It doesn’t sound like he believes him at all, but he drops the subject nonetheless. He probably thinks Izuku is still trying to keep it on the downlow.

And while All Might being mistaken as his father is not the *worst* thing that could happen, it embarrasses Izuku greatly. He would promptly die if Yagi himself heard Todoroki call him that.

Now, what’s *really* embarrassing and incredibly awkward is having to walk past a group of business course and general studies students talking to each other in a large group about *Rabbit*.

Now, to be fair, they could be talking about the stripper, but the chances of that are low.

Izuku walks by quickly, wanting to listen but also *not* in case he somehow spills his secret just by being around them. It’s like when you go to an airport and suddenly start worrying if you have a gun or bomb hidden somewhere on your body that you didn’t know about. There’s no reason for Izuku to think his identity might be outed just by *existing* around people talking about him, but that doesn’t stop him from worrying.

He doesn't know where they're going, and neither does Todoroki, probably, but it's a nice stroll.

"He should have a calling symbol," Todoroki says abruptly when they're nearing the front of the school again.

"Who? Rabbit?" At Todoroki's serious nod, Izuku laughs. "Like Batman?"

His friend just blinks, and that's when Izuku remembers that the standard person won't know who that is.

"I think Rabbit should have a device for when he needs to call for backup," Todoroki explains, staring ahead of him.

"Backup?" Izuku questions. "He doesn't really work with a team, does he? He's still a criminal, so I can't see him with any pro heroes as allies."

A considering tilt of the head. "In the right circumstance, anyone would be willing to help. Bad fights call for team ups. Many heroes would support him, I think."

Izuku matches Todoroki's expression, thinking. The dual-haired boy's interest in Rabbit surprised Izuku at first. He first mentioned the vigilante that day when Izuku invited him over to the lunch table, and Izuku pretty quickly realized that part of Todoroki's interest might come from their shared distaste in Endeavor.

Which only makes Izuku all the more willing to entertain the idea of a calling card. It sounds fun, honestly! He'd finally be chasing that dream of being a little like Batman.

Maybe it could double as a firework in the shape of a dick. That way everyone would know that it's Rabbit. Ooh, or maybe there could be multiple fireworks surrounding a bigger one that explodes into Rabbit's insignia!

"Hey, what do you think about adding *fire* to that idea? With fireworks?"

Todoroki isn't even fazed. "It would draw attention, so fireworks would work."

"It might even be better than some boring spotlight thing!" Izuku agrees, bouncing up and down on his toes. "It would fit perfectly with

Rabbit's persona. I think he would like it."

"But he would still be breaking more laws by using the fireworks," Todoroki points out after a moment's consideration.

"That's even *better—!"* There's the rush of air behind Izuku, and the boy breaks off and immediately drops to the floor, just barely missing the gray capture scarf that wraps around the space he was in just half a second ago. "Hey! What was that f—!"

Oh. Oh no.

Izuku wishes he didn't turn around, as now he feels like a fool. He quickly glances down at his phone, and—yep! It's eight o'clock. His meeting with Aizawa started ten minutes ago. Meaning Izuku was supposed to be in the meeting room *ten minutes ago.*

"You're late, Midoriya. *Again* ." Aizawa is less than pleased, and Izuku straightens up at the tone, not liking the murderous look on his teacher's face.

Fucking *fuck.* Izuku told him this morning that he wouldn't be late, but only because Yamada was there and listening. He never planned on actually following through with it, mostly because he didn't think Aizawa would be up for another chase, but it seems he was wrong.

Play dumb, some part of his brain says, and Izuku's mouth moves without his permission.

"Who's Midoriya?"

A beat of silence. Todoroki stares at him, intrigued now at how this is going to end, and Aizawa just blinks at how insanely stupid Izuku is. He looks like he's just about seen it all.

It's only when Aizawa raises the capture weapon again that Izuku moves.

"Okay, yeah, that was dumb, but listen!" He says, raising his hands innocently and ignoring Todoroki's quiet acknowledgement of the teacher . "I wasn't even checking the time, I swear! It was an accident! I didn't mean to be late!" He winces. "I mean, I did, but only sort of."

"Sort of?" Aizawa echoes, and it sounds like another nail in Izuku's coffin.

Yeah, he should shut up now.

Five seconds stretch on between the three of them, and Izuku is suddenly aware of a few students and parents walking past them and giving them weird looks. This must look funny to an outsider.

He blinks, and then—

“Oh my god, it’s a villain!” He points behind Aizawa and doesn’t stay long enough to even see if he fell for it. He turns and bolts, shouting an apology to Todoroki for leaving him.

This is survival of the fittest now. He’ll have to understand.

Now, the thing about Aizawa’s quirk is that first you have to see your target and make a kind of mental tally in your head for it to actually work on them. So if Aizawa sees movement out of the *very* corner of his eye and chooses not to acknowledge it, the chances of the person still maintaining control over their quirk are high.

So the point is that Aizawa’s quirk is extremely overpowered for his job. It’s *perfect* for chases and group fights since it won’t necessarily affect any of his allies unless he wants it to—the Erasure will only work on the villain in question.

As Izuku runs and darts between parents and students, trying to get out of his teacher’s line of sight, his quirks remain erased the entire time, but everyone else’s around him are perfectly intact as far as he can see.

(And okay, yeah, maybe Izuku shouldn’t be distracting himself by gushing over his teacher’s quirk for the thousandth time, but what else is there to do?)

This is bullshit. He shouldn’t have to be running in the first place, as the conference shouldn’t even be a *thing!* A parent-teacher conference with no parent is just a teacher’s conference! Which is not something Izuku would like to be part of, thanks.

Aizawa is just being stupid again, that has to be the reason. He’s so fucking *controlling.*

He feels Aizawa slow down from where he rounds the corner of the hallway, and Izuku doesn’t waste any time before slipping out of the open front doors, feeling a little panicky now.

Technically he's not supposed to be going outside, but he's not going to run, so no one can be mad! He follows UA's outside wall and goes to where he knows the more secretive second entrance is, punching in Aizawa's ID code for admission before jumping inside.

He slams into someone's back immediately upon entering, making him grab his nose and stumble as he stutters out an apology. Shit. He felt their quirk, he was just going a little too fast to prepare for it—

"Oh, hey kiddo!"

Izuku should've accepted his death peacefully while he could.

Bakugou Mitsuki turns around and immediately brightens up, eyes crinkling near the edges when she smiles. "We were just talking about you, sweetie! I haven't seen you in so long." She goes in for a hug and clutches him tight, squeezing the breath out of him.

"It was only a week, Auntie— *oomph!"* She picks him up off the ground easily and quite nearly cracks his ribcage before setting him back down again, leaving him dizzy.

Izuku feels Kacchan walking towards them with Masaru right behind, and his hands start to tremor again, just slightly.

"How've you been doing?" She asks, pulling back with her hands on her hips. Her eyes are piercing, and it looks like she's searching for something on Izuku's face.

"I'm okay!" He says quickly, seeing Aizawa start to slow down out of the corner of his vision once he spots them. "Nothing but the weather has changed."

Mitsuki doesn't laugh, but she shakes her head in fondness before frowning. "Another new scar, huh?" She reaches forward to thumb the spot on his jaw, and Izuku inwardly preens, his troubles momentarily forgotten. "You need to be more careful, y'know. You're worse than Katsuki."

"Hey!" Kacchan interjects, and Mitsuki immediately turns on him for a petty squabble.

Normalcy at last.

Masaru gives Izuku a side hug when he comes over, and his awkward smile is enough to make Izuku relax again. *Okay, maybe it was too*

long.

He usually sees the Bakugou family at least three times a week, and that's not including when he sleeps over on Thursdays. So to be gone for over a week? It must've been weird.

Aizawa walks up from behind and puts a light hand on Izuku's shoulder, telling him he's there—as if Izuku couldn't already feel him.

Damn. The plan for escape has been foiled.

Mitsuki, as if sensing the newcomer, plasters that bright grin back on her face and stops her mini fight with Kacchan. "Ah, you must be Mr. Aizawa! The boys have told me a lot about you!"

Oh, Jesus fucking *shit.* No! Izuku is still angry at Aizawa, so now is not a good time to bring up his idolization of him. That's not how things are supposed to go.

"I'm Bakugou Mitsuki, Katsuki's mom!"

Masaru smiles warmly too, leaning in for a handshake. "Bakugou Masaru. Pleasure to finally meet you."

Aizawa dips his head and moves a little now so he's beside Izuku, hand still on his shoulder—likely so he won't escape again. "Same to you both." He nods in a greeting at Kacchan, who just sours his expression and looks away.

Izuku bites back a snicker. As long as Kacchan is suffering too, he won't complain so much.

He sees Aizawa open his mouth, likely to excuse Izuku so they can do the conference, but Auntie speaks first.

"You know, Izuku and Katsuki here have been together since they were babies! I was happy to see them both get into the same school and have the same teacher. They can't be split up for too long or—"

A blush has Izuku's cheeks burning a dark shade of red, and he jolts in embarrassment. "Auntie!" He says quickly at the same time as Kacchan barks at her to shut her trap.

"Oh?" is all Aizawa says, one eyebrow raised, which *doesn't help.* The bastard is betraying Izuku. He's *intrigued.*

This is exactly what he never wanted to happen. Aizawa and Mitsuki

meeting? It's not a good thing. The world is going to collapse. Izuku can feel it going off kilter right now! Actually, he's tipping over as they speak—

The hand on his shoulder tightens briefly so Izuku won't fall dramatically, but Izuku's mind is already on the floor. It's sliding away.

"Yeah!" Mitsuki continues. "And they haven't changed one bit from when they were younger, I assure ya. They have a problem with roughhousing a lot."

No! Please, stop! He locks eyes with Masaru, who must hear his silent plea. "Mitsuki, let's not waste Mr. Aizawa's time here. I'm sure he's very busy."

"Oh, please, I just want to talk more with who my nephew is staying with!" A light bulb seems to go off in her head, and she looks at Izuku in concern. "Kiddo, I know you called and told us you would be living with your teacher for a bit, so I'm assuming there's no Hisashi tonight?"

If Izuku's father actually showed up, every single person in Japan would know it.

The smile slips off his face, and he shakes his head tightly. "Not this time," he says, trying not to sound too cheerful, and she seems to understand, as for once she doesn't press.

She just sighs in disappointment before pursing her lips. "Of course he didn't."

The only reason she's disappointed is because she probably wanted to be able to punch someone tonight, and Izuku doesn't blame her.

"He never shows up," Kacchan says darkly, his crimson eyes boring into Izuku's even though he's not really talking to him. "Did you really think he would, hag?"

Shut. Up.

Izuku glares at him in warning, well aware of Aizawa listening to all of this and taking it in. Kacchan stares right back, equally as determined.

I'm so going to fuck you up later, Izuku promises his friend silently, and

Kacchan tips his head forward, as if saying he's looking forward to it.

Masaru looks from Izuku to Aizawa and back again. "In that case, do you need one of us to step in and—?"

"No!" Izuku practically shouts, and everyone in a twenty feet radius turns to stare at him briefly. He laughs nervously and continues before Aizawa can cut in. "No, sorry, it's alright! That's already taken care of. Er, sensei said I don't need a guardian present, so…"

He can't have them talking too much. He loves Auntie and he loves Masaru, too, but he just does not want them in that conference room. Because once Mitsuki starts talking, she won't stop. And Aizawa, being the information-hungry bastard he is right now, won't bother stopping her either.

"Oh, well, okay!" Masaru messes up Izuku's hair briefly before doing the same to Kacchan. "Good to hear that things were worked out beforehand, son."

Izuku nods and Aizawa's hand leaves him. He shifts on his feet when the man finally cuts in to say they have to get going, and he says goodbye to the family after promising Mitsuki that he'll come over soon.

He feels Kacchan and Mitsuki's hot gazes on his back as he's practically herded away by his teacher, and he keeps his head high to hide how unsure he feels.

The past few days have been weird for him.

Once they arrive on the floor of the conference room, Izuku clears his throat. "Well, they're nice, aren't they?"

"They are," Aizawa agrees, face tucked into his capture weapon, and then he promptly trips Izuku.

The boy squawks and scrambles after him. "Hey, what was that for!"

"For running and making a fool out of yourself."

"I'm always a fool," he says cheekily, but Aizawa doesn't even react. He just opens the door of the room to the right and pushes Izuku inside.

"Sit."

“I’m not a dog!” He complains, sitting down in the chair in front of the large mahogany desk. But not the chair in the middle—the one farthest to the left. There’s three of them, and it’s obvious the middle one is for the student.

Aizawa sighs and uses one hand to grip Izuku’s hoodie and drop him in the right chair before making his way to his side of the desk. Which is *also* totally unfair. Izuku is not small, and he is definitely not a kid, so Aizawa should not be able to pick him up with *one fucking hand.*

“I’m telling Yamada you’re taking steroids,” he mutters quietly.

“And I’ll tell him you cheated on his latest pop quiz.”

Izuku sputters at the wild accusation. “Wha—! I would never! I’m already fluent in English! He—he wouldn’t believe it!”

“Sure, but he also wouldn’t believe that I’m taking steroids,” Aizawa says. “I don’t have any use for them.”

Izuku narrows his eyes and looks his teacher up and down, humming in thought. “I don’t know. That sounds like something a juicer would say.”

“Midoriya.” The slightly teasing tone is gone, and Izuku blinks innocently at him.

“Yes, O’ Wise Teacher?”

There it is: an eye twitch. Izuku is getting there. He’s breaking through that wall. Maybe if he annoys the shit out of him he’ll be allowed to leave and this entire thing can be forgotten.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,” Aizawa says flatly, as if reading his thoughts. “Quit it. You’re just making this hard.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve actually been looking forward to this meeting. But now that you mention it, I do think it would be best if we called this whole thing off. Yeah, that’s a great idea!” He starts to get out of his chair. “I *am* a little parched, so I’m just gonna go get a coffee from that one vending machine I broke the other day. I’ll see you—”

“Sit your ass back down *,”* Aizawa says in exasperation, tone brooking no room for argument. “We’re doing this parent-teacher conference whether you like it or not, kid.”

Geez, why do you care so much! At this point this is more of a damn cross-examination.

The heavy silence that follows makes Izuku wince, and he suddenly regrets every damn thing he's said up until now. He honestly didn't mean to say that aloud. It's not… It's not a big deal, really. He doesn't even care. Seeing all of his friends and their families and whatnot tonight—he doesn't care. Not at all. It didn't affect him.

Conferences just aren't his thing. They feel a bit too much like debriefings. Like reports after a mission or order, and maybe that's part of why they scare him so much. Maybe that's why his back has been ramrod straight this entire time, his hands placed neatly in his lap.

Eventually, Aizawa sighs and scrubs his face with a hand, his next words slow, as if talking to a toddler. "I told you before the festival that you wouldn't need a guardian with you, but that *you'd* still have to attend. The only thing that's changed from then to now is that you won't need any paperwork signed. I've got that taken care of."

Izuku looks away, still slightly embarrassed by his outburst. "So why am I here if nothing needs to be done?"

"Because I still need to go over your academic progress at this school, Midoriya, parent or not." Aizawa leans back in his chair, arms folded. His lips pull downwards into a frown, and Izuku can't help but notice how his teacher shaved for this event. There's no stubble on his face, and Izuku doesn't like that. It doesn't seem right. "You skipped homeroom this morning. Why?"

Izuku wrinkles his nose. "I told you when you pulled me out of Snipe-sensei's class that I got lost."

"You got lost?" He echoes, unimpressed. "For over thirty minutes?"

"This place is huge. I might need a map."

"What you *need* is a watch and an attitude check. I'm being serious."

It's just one class, a voice says in Izuku's mind. *It's not even important. Why's he so pressed?*

Izuku is inclined to agree, but then another voice cuts in, this one softer. *Doesn't matter. There are rules and expectations he has to follow, just like everyone else.*

He's not just anyone, though.

Stop encouraging him!

Izuku ignores the rave going on inside him and instead picks at a loose thread on his pant leg. "Could've fooled me," he mumbles. "I can't take anything you say seriously with that stupid look on your face all the time—" He ducks just in time when Aizawa throws a crumpled up piece of paper at him. "See! And you call *me* childish!"

A sudden pause, and the irritated look on Aizawa's face disappears, being replaced with something akin to understanding. "Is that why you've been acting so gloomy today? Because of this morning?"

Izuku crosses his arms to match his teacher. "You were being mean."

Aizawa sighs softly. "How was I being mean, kid? You were purposely being difficult."

"No, I wasn't—!"

"You were trying to convince Hizashi to let you stay at home so you didn't have to go to school."

"I was sick!" Saying this, Izuku lets out a small cough.

"No. You knew the conferences were today and you didn't want to go, so you asked to stay home. Am I correct?"

Izuku looks away again. Honestly, he *is* feeling a little under the weather, but not quite enough to qualify as being sick. He's just… off kilter today. Things feel sharper than before, and his senses are messing with him.

It's like he's watching through someone else's eyes as the world revolves.

"What does it matter?" He flourishes with his hand. "I'm here, aren't I?"

The walls are painted off white, he notices. It makes his skin prickle.

"You are, so let's get this over with as quickly as possible." Aizawa's sternness has diminished now, and he sounds more tired than anything else. "Alright?"

He wants to stay mad. Izuku really does. It's easy to be upset at the

man since he's known him for a while now, but then he remembers Yamada's face this morning when they wouldn't quit arguing. He remembers the tense silence in the car, the displeasure in Aizawa's voice when he pulled Izuku out of Snipe's class to ask him just what the fuck he was thinking.

Izuku may want to stay mad, as it's an emotion he can always fall back into comfortably, but that doesn't mean he wants to be *difficult*.

He can't be a hindrance—an annoyance, maybe, but not a hindrance.

"Okay," he agrees when Aizawa looks like he's about to say something else. He shifts in his chair so he's sitting on it with one knee up to his chest, his other leg repeatedly knocking against the underside of Aizawa's desk.

The man nods, and the relief is evident in his words. "Thank you."

He turns to his laptop and searches through different folders, pulling up multiple files. The light shines on his face and makes him seem less tired, and that's when Izuku notices the candy bowl on the table. It's filled with little sweets like marshmallows and chocolates and lollipops, and Izuku feels like a crack addict when he spots his favorite flavor of lollipop.

That must've been Yamada's doing.

Izuku reaches for the bowl but pauses. "Can I?" He asks.

Aizawa pushes it toward him without saying a word, and Izuku takes that as a yes. He grabs one lollipop—he's not a heathen anymore—and pops it into his mouth, wrapper and all.

He watches Aizawa put on his reading glasses before pushing a paper copy of his files into the middle of the desk for Izuku to see. "Each of your teachers left a few comments on the bottom of the page. We'll go over those in a second; first we should look at your grades."

Something that no student wants to hear.

Izuku pulls his other leg up and sucks hard on the lollipop, distracting himself as Aizawa moves his laptop so Izuku can see the screen.

"You're excelling in most of your classes, namely heroics." Aizawa's eyes slide over to him, expression back to being unreadable. "You have exceptionally high scores and outrank all of the other hero

students in nearly all of the categories All Might has set up."

The boy doesn't move from his position. Praise? Is that what this is?

Yes, comes the amused reply. *Surely you've heard of it before?*

He doesn't appreciate his own sass being used against him.

"But that seems to be the only period where you're actively putting effort in. You're not participating in any of your other classes anymore, at least not that I've seen." Aizawa taps at the papers on the desk, pointing down at the instructor notes. "And based on what your other teachers have said, you've been deliberately getting some answers wrong when called upon in class."

Deliberately? And how exactly does he know that? It's not like he can read Izuku's mind.

"What if I just didn't know the answer?" Izuku questions, not buying into his bullshit for one second.

"Or," Aizawa starts pointedly, "you just weren't paying attention and said the first response that came to mind. Which would make your wrong answer deliberate since you chose not to listen."

"Then why am I getting some of the questions right if I don't pay attention at *all?"*

A lift of the shoulder. "So your inattentiveness wouldn't be too obvious," he says, not breaking eye contact. "You wouldn't be able to have such high scores in your classes if you failed to listen entirely. You have to compromise."

Okay, damn. That… that was fast. Why does he sound so matter-of-fact? Is he not even upset?

"But on the topic of failing." Aizawa doesn't give Izuku a chance to even react to his previous comments before bulldozing on. "The only class you're having trouble in is mine, Midoriya. Which, if you need the reminder, is homeroom."

Izuku snorts. "Yours is the easiest class. We don't even do anything half the time."

"Which is why it's even more disappointing that you're failing it."

Ouch. Yeah, okay, I deserve that.

“To get a good grade in first period, kid, you just have to *show up on time* and do the little assignments I hand out. You usually love those papers, so why haven’t you been turning those in the past couple of days? I remind you every day to do them for homework if you don’t finish in class, so I know you haven’t forgotten them.”

It takes a long time for Izuku to respond, as he’s now malfunctioning. He has to rifle through his brain to see if he can find out *why* exactly he’s chosen to fail himself.

He had a reason at the beginning of all this—to get himself expelled—but since shit hit the fan and consequently placed him under his teachers’ care, he doesn’t think that’s going to matter so much.

And to only do this in Aizawa’s class? Izuku feels stupid, as he can’t even remember why he decided to do that all of a sudden. It’s only been a few days and he’s already forgotten.

Maybe it wasn’t a good reason in the first place. It might’ve been entirely out of pettiness.

“Huh.” Izuku bites his inner cheek and gives a half-smile. “I don’t know, they’re just boring now. They’re… not really my thing?”

Aizawa raises his brow, obviously not believing him but also not willing to argue. “Well, make them your thing. Your grade depends on their completion. Homeroom matters just as much as your core classes, Midoriya. If you don’t pass it, you won’t move on to the next level no matter what your grades are in your other periods.”

Who said anything about making it to the second year of high school? Izuku has to hold back a laugh.

“And *don’t skip my class.* You’re lucky I’m not giving you detention until you *die* for your little adventure this morning.”

“That’s a bit dramatic,” Izuku points out, feeling bold again. “And don’t I technically already have detention after school since I have to stay here until you and Yama are ready to leave?”

Aizawa’s hair starts to float, and he points a finger at his ward. “Don’t get smart. There’s a difference between those two scenarios, kid. Once the bell rings, you have free rein inside the school. But when you have detention, you’re stuck in the classroom doing whatever I tell you to do.”

Izuku opens his mouth to make a joke, but another paper ball is thrown his way in warning, making him shut up. Dammit. He was about to make Kaminari proud.

“Now I want to discuss something that Vlad brought to my attention during lunch.”

“What about Chad?”

He’s not even my teacher. He shouldn’t even be brought up here.

Aizawa looks like he wants to enter the pearly gates. *“That.* That right there. Stop calling him that.”

“But isn't that his new hero name? I thought he changed it last week.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“Your mom said the same thi—” Gray fabric wraps around the back of Izuku’s head and covers his mouth, ripping a strangled noise from his throat.

That was a good one, a voice observes as Izuku sucks in breaths through his nose.

I know, he thinks back.

“Just for that, you have detention for a week.” Aizawa pulls another paper from the pile on top and continues the conference as if the interruption never happened. “Besides homeroom, you’re having the most trouble in history. Is there a reason why?”

Izuku, whose mouth is still covered, glares at him.

The man knows why. Izuku has already expressed his distaste for history and boring subjects. If it’s not related to the development of quirks or hero society, Izuku does not care. He won’t be able to remember all of the dates and times and whatnot in the future anyway, so why bother? He told Aizawa this once on a patrol, and he knows the chances of him forgetting about it altogether are slim.

Okay, now he’s just nitpicking.

The right side of Izuku’s brain itches. *He is. He’s so annoying.*

I wouldn’t say he’s annoying, another voice pipes in. *He’s only doing this because he cares.*

You can be annoying and still have good intentions.

Why do you always have to argue with—

There's a pull at the back of Izuku's mind, and all the invasive voices disappear from his thoughts. It's like somebody got a strike in bowling, with the voices being the pins.

Izuku frowns and uses a hand to yank down a part of the capture weapon. "Did you invite All Might?"

Aizawa looks like he just smelled shit. "What? No, I didn't. Why?"

Instead of answering, Izuku waits for the feeling of his quirk to come closer. As if one cue, there's a hurried knock on the door, and Yagi comes barreling inside without waiting for an answer.

He looks disheveled, with his blond hair sticking up and looking crinkled, but when he turns to stare at the other two in the room he cracks a smile and smooths out his shirt.

"Ah, sorry I'm so late! I got a little lost on the way here!" (Izuku sends Aizawa a pointed look, as if to say *see? It's not just me.)* "I hope I didn't miss anything too important?"

Izuku is about to respond happily, that sparkle back in his eyes, but the scarf tightens itself back around his mouth.

"Yagi, what are you doing here? This is Midoriya's conference."

"I know! I figured I could, well, come sit in! Since… y'know!" Yagi gestures awkwardly to the empty chairs in the room, and he shuffles over to sit to the right of Izuku, settling a hand on his shoulder and not even questioning his current predicament. "I also want to know how he's doing in his studies."

Aizawa picks up his stack of papers, and Izuku wouldn't have been surprised if he ended up slapping Yagi across the face with them. "You're his teacher. You already know."

"Only his heroics teacher!" Yagi tries to lean back in an effort to look more comfortable, but he just looks even more out of place. "But what of his other classes? Is he doing well?"

Izuku and Aizawa stare at him blankly, not quite believing that he just kind of waltzed in. But Izuku certainly isn't complaining. This is

actually the best thing that could've happened.

Why? Because now Aizawa is going to be *distracted.*

All Might and Aizawa—their personalities don't mix well. They're both professional and would probably be unstoppable as a team (even though All Might is already unstoppable), but for private matters like this? They're both unable to hide their own emotions around each other. All Might is unable to simply because he's honest like that, but Aizawa is unable to because he doesn't *care* what people think of him, least of all All Might.

For now, at least. Izuku hasn't seen a ton of their interactions together, so he can't say for certain. But what he does know is that he needs some popcorn for this.

"He's doing just fine," Aizawa answers shortly, his expression quickly turning sour. "He's in the top five of nearly all his classes in terms of grades, barring Homeroom."

While Izuku hates history, he still tries. He doesn't get bad grades in that class, it's just that it's his lowest average compared to all his other scores in his core classes.

"His participation needs some work," Aizawa continues, and Izuku balks.

"I do participate!" He tries to argue, but what comes out is just a string of muffled indignant noises.

"Only when you're paying attention, which is less than half the time."

You don't like it when I participate in homeroom anyway. I get a little too in depth in debates and switch the topics somehow. You actually ignore my raised hand sometimes.

Yagi pulls lightly at the scarf still wrapped around Izuku's face. "Is there a reason he can't speak?"

"No." The capture weapon unravels and falls back onto Aizawa's shoulders. "As I was saying, he's doing well. I've had to separate him from Kaminari and Ashido a few times, but other than that his behavior in class is to be expected. The rest of his teachers have said similar things."

"Last time wasn't my fault," Izuku mutters. "Kaminari wanted to see if

Kacchan's hair would poof up even more if he shocked him, and at that point how could I say no—"

"Moving on. The principal wanted me to inform you that he found the surprise you left in his office earlier today, and that he was highly amused by your creativity."

Izuku has to physically hold back his smirk. He figures now is not the time to laugh.

"I'm not going to ask," Aizawa says without looking up from his notes. "But whatever it was, don't do it again."

As the man reads off more points that Izuku doesn't care too much about, Yagi leans over to whisper to Izuku, holding up a palm so Aizawa won't hear: "What was the surprise?"

"I put a box of his favorite tea near a mouse trap and set it in the middle of his carpet."

"Oh… how did you get into his office?"

Izuku lifts a shoulder. "The ceiling was unlocked."

"Ah," Yagi says, nodding in understanding as if he knows what the fuck that means.

"So." Aizawa's words are pointed, and both Yagi and Izuku straighten up immediately. "To wrap things up, you need to start paying more attention in your classes, Midoriya. Despite recent events, you still have to maintain decent grades. To do that, you need to actually do your assignments."

I still don't see why going to this school matters anymore, but okay. I'm only here partially because All Might thought it would be a good idea.

Yagi hums, lips downturning. "I remember the principal mentioning that since Midoriya has already finished high school, he wouldn't be required to do paper assignments for any classes other than field heroics and battle training."

"Principal Nezu said it was up to me to decide that," Aizawa says in slight annoyance, ignoring Izuku's betrayed gasp. "After some consideration, I decided that it'd be best to treat him the same as his classmates."

Bullshit. Is he kidding?

Yagi doesn't get it either. "What purpose does making him relearn such repetitive content serve? I can't imagine that doing much good in light of recent events."

"Think of it as a refresher course. There's nothing wrong with extra learning. In fact, that means this all should be incredibly easy for you, Midoriya, since you've already learned it."

"Shouldn't he focus on more hero related things? Or survival training, at least? Given his… predicament," Yagi flashes Izuku an awkward look, "it might be best to prioritize other aspects of his learning, yes?"

Aizawa leans forward a little more in his chair, glare sharpening. "As his homeroom teacher, I think he'll do just fine moving at the same pace as his classmates. Midoriya does not need to miss out on his other classes just for more heroics training, Yagi. This isn't boot camp."

What the fuck is happening here?

"Of course not," Yagi agrees, "but even still, isn't forcing him to complete everything for graduation to the next grade a little much? I can understand the participation thing, but the papers? I was never a fan of those kinds of assignments either, as sometimes even *I* flunked them, but I turned out just fine!"

Okay, even Izuku cringes just a little at that.

"Is that supposed to be reassuring? Midoriya needs something to do, so assignments are the way to go. I don't care if he technically doesn't have to do them—he's doing them because it's a sure way to keep him on task."

"I'm right here," Izuku mutters, raising a hand, but the two adults go right back to their disagreement.

"Of course!" Yagi says, trying to appease his younger coworker. "But I've trained with Midoriya for over ten months, you see, and he's almost always been on task during lessons. So I think there are better ways to keep his interest and measure his understanding than paper assignments—"

Aizawa's eye twitches, and Izuku glances back and forth between the two with his lips pursed. It really isn't a big deal. Izuku doesn't mind

doing the assignments, but if Yagi is going to argue on his behalf, who is he to tell him to stop?

“He’s not getting special treatment,” Aizawa deadpans. “His classmates have to do them, so he will as well. As I was saying—”

“It’s not special treatment, exactly—”

Aizawa sounds like he’d be levitating right now. *“All Might.”*

If he’s being truthful, Izuku hasn’t really seen this stubborn side of All Might. But it’s interesting to see it come out against the equally stubborn underground hero. Izuku is confused, and also a bit irritated.

This feels like a dick measuring contest, his mind says, and Izuku snorts.

When the two start to argue again, this time a little louder, Izuku gets up from his chair slowly and backs away, towards the door. He turns the handle and waits, but neither of the adults say anything, so he slips outside and shuts it with a quiet click.

“Wow,” he says to himself. “That was weird.”

Thanks All Might! Now Izuku is free.

Izuku wanders around, needing to get away from that entire conversation. He goes back to the main area and sees Uraraka with her family again. He talks to Iida for a bit, who already had his conference with his brother on a face call, apparently.

He doesn’t ask why it wasn’t his parents on the call.

Izuku fiddles with the ring on his hand and thinks of Shinsou, as he spotted him walking with a nice looking woman outside. He’s felt him in the early mornings at school through *Extract,* which is intriguing. Izuku gets to school early because of Yamada and Aizawa, and Aizawa has been going to the gyms and the practice fields early on without anyone else to train.

And so has Shinsou.

It’s obvious that he’s training with Aizawa now, and Izuku is more than pleased. When he asked his teacher about his findings, the man told him that it’s just some extra training and that Izuku needs to worry about himself rather than another student. Izuku wanted to join

in on some of those training sessions, but Aizawa denied the request immediately. He actually told him to *stay away.*

Izuku has never felt more offended, but that doesn't matter now.

He'll sneak in one morning anyway and see what happens. He's been dying to see more of the lilac-haired boy.

After getting bored of social interactions, Izuku jumps up onto a high statue on the third floor, peeking outside the windows.

It's starting to get dark outside, and it's one of those nights where most of the stars are visible. He itches to go on the roof, but he stops himself. He knows there are new alarms on the roof now, so if he takes one step out on the top, the teachers will be pinged.

Does Yama like stars? I know he likes to paint and draw too, so what if I make him something? Would he like it?

Eventually, Sero comes around the corner and swings himself up on Izuku's hiding space. He crouches there and allows Izuku to play with some tape. "Whatcha looking at Midoriya?"

"Space!" He gestures to the sky, and Sero squints as he looks too. He doesn't look impressed, but Izuku doesn't mind.

"Huh." Sero glances at him, and in this position they're both incredibly close to each other. He grabs Izuku's shoulder and shakes him a little. "Hey, wanna meet my sis?"

Izuku blinks, stopping his fiddling with the tape to stare at him. *He wants me to?*

He jumps down from the statue and is then introduced to the Sero family, too, and Ashido joins soon after with her own guardians. Soon after, he spots more students exploring the school and going to their conferences. He sees Kaminari showing his mother a piece of paper with a smile, and she proudly ruffles his hair while saying something.

Izuku feels a pang in his chest and turns away, choosing to look out the window again as the hallway floods with more students. His social battery has been low for a while now, so it's best to get away from such a large crowd while he can. He instead uses his quirk to search for Kayama, wanting to talk to her since he hasn't seen her since class.

But then he finds her in a conference room of her own with her own students and he changes his course.

That's when he feels him—exactly who he's looking for.

His eyes sharpen, and his fingers flex as he takes the stairs down another level and heads right towards the danger.

This is something to preoccupy him with.

'He'll be here in time for the conference and that's all.'

His phone says it's about that time. Izuku got a glimpse of Aizawa's timesheet on the desk when he pushed it towards him, and he saw that Todoroki's conference was supposed to be right after his.

It's been just over twenty minutes since he walked out of his meeting, and since he doubts the meeting for them lasted any more than a few minutes, it would make sense that Todoroki's just finished.

Endeavor's trying to leave the school, and Izuku is in the perfect spot to intercept and see his friend too.

Maybe this will help the pang in his chest. Izuku has always been petty, and it's not his fault, really.

He likes playing with fire.

Chapter End Notes

thoughts on pickled sausages?

i rlly like this song on yt!!!

(i lied 😓 no internship discussion in this chap, but only because I had to split it up so this wouldn't be another 15k+ chap)

s

courting benevolence

Chapter Notes

warnings: referenced child abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m assuming there’s no Hisashi tonight?”

Izuku’s hands flex as he walks down the hallway, steps light and purposeful. He hates that name; he despises it. He wishes Auntie would quit calling the bastard that. That’s not who he is. He was never *Midoriya Hisashi.*

No, Izuku’s father has many names, but that’s only because he knows damn well he doesn’t belong anywhere. He *shouldn’t* belong anywhere. He’s a thief. An artist. A *liar* holding all the cards and dealing all the aces.

Midoriya Hisashi was just another name to add to an ever growing list of aliases. Izuku doubts he even holds any attachment to it, even now. Even with his own son sharing part of the name he made up. Even with his fucking *wife* sharing it.

And maybe that’s why Izuku hates it so much. Maybe that’s why he hates his last name and feels his heart jump a little every time someone says Yamada’s first name in a certain tone of voice.

He could change it, is the thing. He could’ve done that years ago if he really tried. The legal stuff aside, it would’ve been easy to just start calling himself something different. He could’ve chosen a different name for himself—something he could actually be proud of. For a long time after escaping the grasp of his father, he’d debated using his mother’s maiden name to get rid of *Midoriya,* but somehow he knew she wouldn’t approve.

So Izuku instead listened to those nasty voices inside his head and left it how it was. Whether he regrets it or not now doesn’t matter; he’s stuck with it either way unless he decides to *tell* someone he’d like to change it.

But that would require giving a reason, and he’d rather not even go that far.

He just hates the way it sounds on his tongue . He hates that *Hisashi* was the only name his mother knew All for One by. It's the fact she didn't even know it was fake that pisses Izuku off. Inko fell in love with someone who didn't even exist, really. Hisashi was her daring husband, her lover, her sweet friend—but what she didn't know is that he was living another life under a much different name whenever Inko closed her eyes or even glanced in the other direction.

It was all so *easy* for All for One, too . That's what makes it worse.

"He never shows up. Did you really think he would?"

Izuku sucks in a shaky breath at the same time as he starts to dig his nails into his palms. He tries to think of what would've happened if his father had actually shown up, but the images in his head make him want to throw up on the polished tile beneath him, so he ends that line of thinking immediately.

He feels like punching something again. His fingers are twitching on their own accord, almost as if a current is going through them now. And since Kacchan isn't around to fuck up like he promised his friend he would later, he doesn't have much of an outlet.

The gyms are open for the parents to take a look at, so he can't exactly go in and destroy the one he's been frequenting these last few days. He also can't go pick a fight with Nezu, as he's surely busy, which leaves only a couple other options…

If anyone ever asks, he's going to call it a coincidence. Luck. Bad timing. That's always his excuse—and it works most of the time, because what are they going to do? Prove otherwise? With *what* evidence?

You shouldn't be searching for trouble like this, a soft voice says in his mind, but it just makes Izuku angrier. It sounds so *patronizing.* He hates these fucking voices. He's been hearing them a lot lately, making him think he must be going insane or something.

"It's crazy how I didn't ask," he says aloud, tracking the feeling of that hell quirk while he walks. "And I'm not searching for it. Where did you get that idea? Trouble just finds me, not the other way around."

Is that what you tell yourself?

"Only every day. And c'mon, admit it, I'm never wrong."

You lie almost as well as you do makeup, Izuku.

The last one was said in a different tone than the others, and Izuku chooses to ignore it completely even as he shudders at the use of his first name.

"I'll kill you," he says absentmindedly, only to wince at the bewildered looks he receives from passersby. *I hope no one reports me for that. I'll need some good luck to explain that one to Nezu.*

He's close enough now that *Extract* is stirring beneath his skin, prickling at his fingertips and burning at the indents in his palms. It feels like liquid fire, and he enjoys it. He *always* enjoys being around those with fire quirks; they, to put it simply, hit differently.

Half of his mind is screaming *danger, danger, danger!* while the other half is cheering him on. And Izuku is never one to leave an excited crowd hanging.

A parent sets their steaming cup down on a ledge and turns away to mull over a few medals on the wall. Their kid is happily talking to them about what it represents, preoccupying them, so Izuku doesn't think twice before casually snagging it and continuing along.

He straightens up and plasters an innocent look on his face as he gets close to the corner up ahead. *He's getting close,* he thinks. *I don't even need my quirks to be able to tell that. I can already feel the heat and hear his stupidly heavy feet.*

Ten steps. Five more and Izuku is reaching the bend. He pauses right before he passes it, taking a shallow breath in as he counts the last few seconds until the quirk *Extract* both hates and loves is right upon him.

Then Izuku steps out, feigning a slip. He goes crashing into the large body before him, the cup in his hand exploding at the impact and sending scalding brown liquid—hot chocolate, his brain supplies—all over the number two hero's nice suit. And a *suit?* Really? Izuku had half expected the man to come in his whole hero costume.

"Oh, geez! I'm so sorry, sir!" Izuku drops down low, dragging his soaked hands down Endeavor's slacks and leaving even darker stains behind. He tries to 'wipe it off' the best he can, smiling secretly beneath his mop of curls when he only succeeds in making it even worse. "How clumsy of me! So sorry!"

“Get off,” Endeavor says in irritation, already jerking away. He sounds disgusted, and Izuku’s malevolence grows exponentially just at those two words.

“Yes, of course!” Izuku grabs the crumpled cup from off the ground and *accidentally* spills the last little bit on Endeavor’s shoes. They were a little too polished anyway.

Movement catches his vision, and Izuku flashes an awkward smile at Todoroki, who was standing almost on the opposite side of the hallway, far away from his father, before the collision. Now he’s approaching Izuku slowly, that lightness from earlier coming back to his features.

“Oh, Todoroki! Nice to see you again!”

His friend looks like he’s going to say something in reply before he seems to remember something, and then he just nods. There’s a dark kind of anger on his face now, so raw that Izuku can’t help but blink at him in mild surprise.

He turns back to Endeavor, and it’s only then that he remembers how *large* he is. He forgets about it every time, but now he can feel his hackles rising yet again. His suit is a velvety red, and Izuku feels another bout of satisfaction overcome him.

Yeah. That hot chocolate isn’t coming out of that anytime soon.

Endeavor’s flames are on, framing his head and face, and Izuku wonders—not for the first time—how the sprinklers haven’t gone off yet. He kind of wishes they would; Endeavor obviously only keeps his flames on to show how strong he is. He just *screams* rich and powerful. Why else would he have his quirk almost always active, even at a school full of a ton of other pro heroes?

Izuku spots a small scar on the man’s jaw. It’s thin and white, and honestly it’s not far from what Izuku’s looks like. Endeavor hasn’t appeared much in the news lately, but it’s obvious he’s been doing other missions, Izuku thinks. Ones that aren’t as public.

Which means he has a personal agenda going on.

Oh, boy. He doesn’t like the way Endeavor is staring down at him now. *Perhaps* he has chosen to bark at the wrong tree this time.

Perhaps. Not likely, though.

The tension in the hallway builds up even more when Izuku flashes the man before him his absolute best smile. The same smile that never fails to get him out of rough situations with civilians—and ironically the same smile that lands him in a holding cell by Tsukauchi every single time.

“I haven't even done anything yet!” Izuku pouts when his signature grin doesn’t work, hands wrapping around the bars keeping him locked up. “Why am I being subjected to such mistreatment! This is foul play!”

Detective Tsukauchi sucks on a sugar-free lollipop. That bastard. “You know, son, I probably would've let you out if you hadn’t just said yet *.”*

Izuku wants to ask for a lie detector test to prove his innocence, but then quickly realizes how dumb that would be.

He was hoodwinked back then. Positively tricked. His smile didn’t work then, and Izuku is sure it won’t work now.

He’s counting on it, actually. He’s got an angry itch he still needs to take care of.

It’s like the large hallway they’re in somehow gets bigger. Students and parents pass by in awe, not wanting to stay and ask the number two hero for an autograph. It’s mostly out of fear: you *never* ask Endeavor for an autograph.

Everyone knows that. Izuku does too.

But *this* is a special occasion, he thinks. This is warranted.

Izuku takes half a second to calm himself down a little before his next action. He can’t be Rabbit here. He can’t be as… fiery as he was last time at the festival. He has to calm down on the snark or else Endeavor might find out.

And it’s interesting, at least to Izuku, how Endeavor hasn’t left yet. Normally the bastard would shove past any poor soul who had bad enough luck to stumble into him, or just walk right past them. This time, though, he’s doing neither of those. He’s staring down at Izuku with icy eyes, something unreadable flashing across his expression. He’s studying Izuku. Sizing him up, almost, and it takes everything in Izuku not to outwardly shudder.

Endeavor is one scary, scary man, and he reminds Izuku of someone else. Though he can confidently, *traitorously* say that Endeavor isn’t

quite so powerful.

No, Izuku isn't *that* afraid of this overgrown bonfire. There are worse kinds of flames out there.

"Ah, sir! Again, I'm so sorry!" He does an exaggerated bow and tips his head to one side before looking up. "I haven't seen you since the festival. I hope you've been doing well?"

"You again." Endeavor sounds like he saw something disgusting. Izuku wonders if there's a mirror around here anywhere. The man finally moves to push past him, but that controlled rage takes hold of Izuku again and makes him take a step in front of the other to prevent him from moving.

Please, God, I want you to shove me. Do it.

"Welcome to UA," Izuku greets, now all professionalism. "I'm sure you've seen a lot of it by now, so I hope it's to your liking! It's a great place to study heroics."

"Get out of my way, and don't act as if I'm new here, brat. I was a student here long before you were even born."

He's surprisingly even tempered, one of the rougher voices in Izuku's head says, and the boy feels a hot rush of satisfaction overtake him at the realization.

Oh, he won't be for long.

"Yes, of course! My bad!" Izuku laughs awkwardly, watching as Endeavor pushes onward and walks past him. "You're just so old I forgot UA even existed back then, you know?"

Imagine a sheet of glass falling on the ground. It manages to stay perfectly intact with not a crack to be found. That is, until a hammer comes out of nowhere and lands in the middle of it, immediately shattering it.

That's what Izuku's comment just did, evident by the way Endeavor pauses and turns back, making Izuku's heart give a little jolt. Even while he was running from this man a couple times as Rabbit, Izuku doesn't think he ever earned that kind of look from him.

Ooh, boy, I'm dying tonight!

The flame hero directs a scornful look at him, and it feels a little like mercy. Before he can say anything, however, Izuku is already pulling out a notebook and flipping it to a marked page. “But if it’s not too much trouble, could I have you sign this notebook of mine? I only let the best heroes do it in this one!”

Izuku sees the exact moment that Endeavor processes All Might’s large signature on the spread being shown. It takes up the whole two pages, so it’s not like it was hidden.

Or like it was an accident.

Endeavor pushes the notebook roughly into Izuku’s chest before making one final attempt to leave. “I’m not giving autographs, and certainly not to you. If you know what’s best for yourself, boy, you’ll stop annoying me. I don’t have time to deal with an insolent brat like you.” He huffs something fierce, his next words passing through gritted teeth. “Shouto. We’re going now.”

He puts a hand on Todoroki’s shoulder to steer him away, but his son shrugs it off angrily. “Don’t touch me,” he hisses.

Endeavor glares and barks back at him, trying to forcefully move him along anyway.

And there it is again: the familiarity. That looming presence, those sharp words, that aura that just *demands* respect—it’s pissing Izuku off, and fuck does he hate it. He hates seeing that look on Todoroki's face that only ever shows up when his father is involved. He hates how *unbothered* Endeavor is acting now, which is a stark contrast to how he was before.

Now, if you ask him later, Izuku will say it was on purpose just for fun, but honestly? He doesn’t know why he says it. He doesn’t know why he keeps going. He just does; it’s almost like a need.

“Wait, Enji!”

It’s like everything goes dead silent. Endeavor’s spat with his son halts, and both fire users turn to look at him at the same time. Todoroki is staring at him in awe, and a few of the braver passersby do the same.

Izuku has a feeling that okay, yeah, this is definitely a tree he probably shouldn’t have barked up.

Endeavor is frozen in place, shocked, but only for a moment. He doesn't seem to quite process what Izuku just said, or even the audacity that he'd just shown. He's probably stuck on the absolute *contempt* that colored the boy's tone when he called out to him. But then that dark, dark rage passes over Endeavor's face again and turns him back into that monster Izuku can sometimes still see in his dreams.

"*What* did you say?" For all of his heat, the words are cold. Sharp and frigid. He stomps closer and Todoroki jolts forward, as if to do something, but hesitates.

Danger sirens go off in Izuku's mind. Endeavor's shadow looms over him and blocks out the light cascading down from above, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Izuku instinctively squares him up in his head, looking the hero over and calculating on instinct.

Could he win in a one-on-one fight against Endeavor? No. That much is obvious.

But would Endeavor come out fully unscathed and with his pride intact? Izuku would make sure the answer is no.

This isn't the time for that, multiple voices scream at him, putting the sense back into him. And he knows they're right. He's not completely stupid at the moment. He knows that.

Izuku would end up back in the hospital if he tried to actually physically fight him. Endeavor is not the number two for nothing.

And so, just to make up for his previous stupidity, Izuku gives that same innocent, sheepish grin. "Sorry, sir! I was just trying to get your attention." He doesn't give him a chance to respond before raising a hand. "I wanted to ask one last question before you left!"

"I'm not going to answer some *foolish—"*

"You're still missing some family photos from your agency, right? I heard they were the only things taken during the raid on your office." He blinks sincerely at him. "You know? The one that happened around a year ago? I know I asked if your office was finally cleaned up at the festival. Do you think you'll ever get those photos back, or were they incriminating enough for criminals to keep as some sort of blackmail for the future?" A concerned half-smile, though Izuku's eyes don't match the tone of his voice. "I've been really worried about that whole raid. Do you think that kind of blackmail would be enough to

ruin you?"

The effects are near instantaneous. In a fraction of a second, Endeavor's flames triple in size with a muted *fwump,* extending to halfway to the ceiling, and Izuku hears some of the civilians around them scramble back to get away from the sudden heat.

It's a scorching kind of fire that reminds Izuku of his apartment, and at this point in time he can more easily see the regret and panic and *anger* in Endeavor's blue eyes. It's laid out so obviously in his expression, too, only partially hidden beneath his flames, and Izuku gets it.

The hero has his fire on nearly all the time as a display of power, sure, but it's also to hide his emotions. It hides his weaknesses. Because Todoroki Enji is admittedly *terrible* at hiding his fear.

And it seems he's got a lot of it.

Okay. Yep. Izuku has made a grievous mistake that he's about to pay for dearly in about 0.2 seconds.

Todoroki is already walking forward, his own panic clear in his jerky movements, but Endeavor is quicker.

His large hand comes up, suit sleeve sliding down a little to reveal calloused skin, and at first it looks like he's going to slap Izuku, but it turns into something different at the last moment. He's about to *grab* him. "You little *street rat—"*

There's quick footsteps, a warm presence at the back of his skull, and then a booming laugh as a large hand rests heavily on Izuku's shoulder.

"Endeavor!" All Might greets loudly, speaking as if they're old friends. His unexpected arrival has Izuku tensing up even as his mentor towers over him from behind. "Nice seeing you here! Our time together at the Sports Festival was too quick, wouldn't you say?"

They met then? I might have to bribe Nezu for the security footage of that encounter. All Might protection mode: activated.

Endeavor curls his lip, but he seems to rethink showing *too* much hatred for the other due to the now *many* people crowding around them. The civilians are walking by but obviously watching and overhearing. He can't be aggressive with All Might. Not here. Not with

his son, and certainly not at the place of their old school.

Izuku fucking *lives* for the irritation on his face.

“I see you’re getting more familiar with Young Midoriya here! He and Young Todoroki get along quite well.”

Todoroki shifts on his feet from the corner of Izuku’s eye, and the boy has to stop himself from walking over to him. Doing that might upset Endeavor to the point of hurting *Todoroki.*

All Might…

“Move,” Endeavor orders for the second time, flames crackling with even more intensity. It’s like he’s trying to make himself look even taller than his rival.

Yagi doesn’t move, though he does put his hands out in front of him in a placating gesture. “Ah, as pleasant as always!”

Izuku takes advantage of the very convenient distraction, opting to study Todoroki even more to gauge how far he can keep going with this. There are no new burns or injuries on him, at least not ones that Izuku hasn’t seen before. Izuku had asked Kacchan what Todoroki looked like after that first day back following the Sports Festival, and while the answer wasn’t unexpected, it still made Izuku’s gut churn. It made his blood pressure rise exponentially, and he thinks that that might be happening again at this moment.

The hand on his shoulder squeezes briefly, and Izuku glances up at his mentor, noting the way steam trails out of the corner of his mouth. *What…? Why did you come out here if you knew your limit was almost up?*

Endeavor cuts off whatever bullshit All Might was saying and instead makes direct eye contact with Izuku. When he speaks, his voice is low, making Izuku have to strain to hear him. “You should teach your ward to shut his mouth when he’s asked,” he advises Yagi, eyes still trained on Izuku.

His gaze is piercing, critical. There’s something more there that Izuku can’t quite place. Endeavor is searching for something, but *what?*

Yeah, his brain says unsympathetically, *you fucked up tonight.*

Izuku doesn’t care when people insult him. Most of the time he can

find some humor in the hurt. This is no different. He's slow to anger when people are making fun of him, so he doesn't mind this time. He just plasters on that same sharp smile, mimicking Yagi's, and holds Endeavor's gaze.

All Might brushes the advice off with a laugh. "Your jokes never fail to amaze me, Todoroki! I'll leave you two be now, I apologize for the intrusion. I'll see you!"

He sees Endeavor's face screw up in agitation. He turns away and beckons at his son, his flames still high and hot and mesmerizing, a sure indicator that Izuku accomplished what he was trying to do.

"I hope not," Endeavor says bluntly. He beckons his son with a twitching hand; Izuku stares at the way it shines under the light of his fire. "Come, Shouto."

Is he injured?

Todoroki doesn't follow his father immediately. He stays where he is and casts a glance at Izuku and All Might, and Izuku wants nothing more than to lurch forward and grab his hand, to pull him to where All Might is, to yank him away from the seriously dangerous man who's now barking at Todoroki to hurry up and not waste his time on others.

That's the last straw for Izuku, really. He makes to go after his friend (when did he ever start accumulating so many?) with his resolve snapping like a thread, but he can't move. The large hand on his shoulder prevents him from taking another step forward, and Izuku looks up incredulously.

All Might's face is suddenly stony as he continues to stare at Endeavor's retreating back, making sure he's gone.

Oh. Dread drops like a stone in Izuku's stomach, and the boy swallows something large in his throat.

All Might says nothing to him while he steers them away. He greets students and parents hurriedly as they make their way to the teacher's lounge, signing autographs and taking quick selfies all the while, and Izuku doesn't miss the smoke coming out of him at an even faster rate now.

He's obviously close to his limit, given by how he deflates instantly upon closing and locking the door to the private lounge. They don't

need any lost parents or students wandering in to see his true form, after all.

Blood spurts out of his mouth when Yagi coughs, and Izuku reaches out to him with a frown. “Hey, are you—?”

“My boy, are you *trying* to get yourself killed?”

Izuku’s eyes fly open at just how *sharp* the words are. His brain short circuits, and he has to take a second to collect himself. Yagi’s voice is… different. Way different than Izuku has ever heard it before. It’s not harsh like Aizawa’s is sometimes or filled with any kind of disappointment like Yamada’s can be; it’s just *stern.* Disbelieving.

Disappointed, someone inputs helpfully.

His dread makes way for panic, and Izuku can’t help but cower a little under Yagi’s intense stare. “Sir?”

All Might crosses his bony arms, frown deepening and causing the shadows on his face to darken. “You have better self-restraint than that. I know you do because I’ve seen it firsthand. So what on earth happened back there? *Why* did you provoke him like that?”

Provoke him? Is that what Izuku did? It didn’t feel like it. It’s just easy to upset Endeavor. He was just giving him a taste of his own medicine, so it’s not like Izuku was being totally unfair or something. And please, it’s *Endeavor.* Anyone else would do the same thing Izuku did if they had the balls.

But even as he thinks this, the tips of Izuku’s ears start to burn. He looks down at his feet, not wanting to see Yagi’s expression. He’s not used to being scolded by him. All Might isn’t *supposed* to lecture him for something like this. That’s Aizawa’s job—and yet Izuku has a feeling even his other teacher would turn a blind eye in this particular circumstance.

So why is Yagi acting like what Izuku did was bad? He used to be the same way, right?

“Well?” The blond prompts, and the impatience sounds so wrong coming from him that Izuku starts to fidget with his hands behind his back now.

“I don’t know. I just—I didn’t *provoke* him, really! It just happened!”

“Really?” Yagi says flatly. “It just happened, did it?”

“I mean, yeah! He deserved it!”

“He was trying to go home,” All Might points out with a shake of his head, and izuku is tempted to ask how the fuck he knows that when he only arrived at the tail end of the whole situation, but he has the sense not to. “Correct me if I’m wrong, my boy, but it was *you* who stopped him.”

“It was actually hot chocolate that did that.” He says, trying for a smile, only to gulp when Yagi doesn’t even crack a smile. He continues in a much smaller voice. “All Might, come on, he was mistreating Todoroki! I just—I knew they had their conference, so all I wanted was to really quickly check up on them and see how—”

“That is not an *excuse.”*

Izuku winces, nails making crescents in his palms. His jaw snaps shut and he pouts. *I know. I know it’s not. But this isn’t even a big deal!*

“I understand you’re just trying to protect a friend. Believe me, I am well aware of a bit of their family situation and am keeping an eye on Todoroki for now, but you still cannot go picking fights like that. I do not say this to discredit you, but you are no match for him.”

“I know that! I wasn’t trying to *fight* him, it’s just…” Izuku rubs at his arms, trailing off. “I don’t know. He pisses me off.”

He reminds Izuku a little too much of someone else, more specifically.

Yagi studies him for a moment, and Izuku focuses on the clock ticking in the corner of the room to stop the uncomfortable itch on his skin. He sees one of Aizawa’s sleeping bags slung over the arm of the couch and wishes he could just take it right now and disappear.

“You were still upset over your own conference, weren’t you?” All Might doesn’t wait for Izuku to respond. “And so seeing Endeavor tonight was the breaking point for you, yes? He made you act irrationally.”

Izuku can only shrug, not liking how his emotions and thoughts are being put out there in such a simplified manner. It sounds so childish the way All Might describes it.

And he’d hate more than anything to prove Aizawa right.

“I see.” Yagi must see the look on his face, as he continues firmly. He’s still angry, Izuku can tell. Or at least irritated. “Even still, Endeavor is the number two hero, which means you *cannot* go picking meaningless fights with him whenever you—”

“Endeavor doesn’t deserve to be number two,” Izuku mutters, more to himself than anything, and All Might sighs.

“Midoriya, not this again. We’ve been over this before.”

“I know he’s strong, and I know he still saves people every day with his quirk, but he just isn’t fit to be called a top hero when all he does is hurt his kids and—”

“My boy.” His voice is a warning now.

“—put lesser criminals in the hospital with serious and life-threatening burns for seemingly no reason—”

“Young man.”

“—and not to mention his *extensive* list of property damage and claims filed against him for—”

“Midoriya!”

Izuku stops the flood of words and turns away, dropping his voice immediately upon realizing what the hell he was saying. “Sorry,” he mutters, glancing at the door in hopes that someone, *anyone* will walk through to save him.

Yagi lets out another big sigh, but this time it’s more tired than anything. He swipes a hand down his face and clears his throat, as if to try and sound more sincere. “I know. It’s okay. Just… It’s alright. You cannot get so upset over these things, do you understand? You are going to get him on you, and trust me when I say you do not want that. He’s already very suspicious of Rabbit, is he not?”

Izuku mumbles something under his breath in response, and Yagi taps his ear pointedly.

“That is a yes or no, Young Midoriya.”

He flushes in shame and kicks at the floor, wanting this conversation to be over already. “Yes.”

“So you should know why interacting with him the way you did,

especially with how hostile you were appearing, is not a good idea. That was foolish, what you did back there. *Incredibly* foolish, my boy."

Shit. Does he have to say it like that? Now Izuku really is feeling bad, mostly because he's right. While Izuku doesn't really regret pissing off the flame hero that much more, he can recognize how stupid it all was. He can also recognize that he put himself in danger, especially because of what he said to Endeavor before at the festival.

Screwing up his face, Izuku apologizes again, this time a little more sincere. He's sorry for worrying All Might, not so much his actions.

Not that anyone will have to know that.

Yagi stares at him for another few moments before seeming to deflate. He puts on a grim smile, nudging Izuku with an elbow. "Come now, please don't make that face. You look like you just saw a kicked puppy!" He grabs his shoulders with both hands, and Izuku glances up to meet his eyes. "Just please refrain from doing that again, yes? You scare me a lot when you act so recklessly."

A slap would've hurt less than that last part.

Izuku tips his head, trying to push aside those bad feelings and make a joke to lighten the air. "But I learned it from you?"

Yagi sputters at the words. He spews out blood and pounds on his chest to stop his coughing. "I don't remember teaching you to pick fights with top heroes, my boy!"

"I mean, you make me fight *you* all the time." Izuku yelps when All Might grabs and yanks him toward him. "Hey! What are you—!"

The man uses his arm to roughly mess up Izuku's hair, giving him a noogie in retaliation. "Oh, so I'm the cause of all this, am I, young man?"

Izuku struggles to pry his mentor's hands off him. *Mission successful.*

"Only partially!" He wheezes, wriggling around like a dying fish. He digs his heels into the ground and powers up One for All, about to wrench himself free from Yagi's grasp, but then there's a plume of smoke and suddenly much *bigger* muscles are preventing his escape. "Woah, woah! You *liar!* What about your time limit!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself now," All Might says with a sharky grin.

“One minute is all I need to win against you, kid!”

Bastard!

Izuku wrestles with his mentor, mindful of his torso area, and tries to get his own revenge by messing up All Might’s bangs. Except he’s not quite tall enough to reach that high, so he has to crouch down low and use *Boost* in his legs to be able to grab them.

The blond squawks in indignation when Izuku yanks him down, making him trip over the table in front of him. He stumbles over it and tries to right himself, but Izuku doesn’t give him that chance. He plants both of his feet on the hero’s chest, planning to send him crashing against the wall—but All Might doesn’t move. He barely even flinches at the rush of air that erupts from the action.

See, this is how Izuku *knows* it’s been too long since he got to fight him. He forgot just how weak most of his moves are against Yagi.

There’s a weird, awkward moment spent with Izuku hanging in the air, trying to process just how dumb he is to try that move on a literal unmovable rock, and then that moment is up and Izuku is falling to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Damn. Izuku’s breath escapes him alongside his dignity, and he stays on the ground for a second, just staring at the lights in the ceiling. “That’s it. I’m retiring.”

All Might chuckles, bending at the waist to look at Izuku and blocking out the lights above. “That should be my line, my boy.”

Someone would have to beat you with a stick to get you to actually retire.

Izuku eyes the hand being held out to him and gives a small smile before grabbing it. Except he powers up One for All right as Yagi pulls him up, and he uses the extra momentum to launch himself at his mentor— *much* harder than before.

His legs and arms burn with the power, and he sends All Might crashing through the door behind him. And when he says crashing, he means *literally* crashing, because now there’s an All Might-shaped hole in the wall and the door is… no more.

The door is *broken.* It’s now being crushed under All Might’s back, who is laying dazed on the ground. He looks like a goat after being scared by something.

Izuku mentally runs through the possibilities of Nezu hunting him down for breaking yet another door before raising both brows. “Damn,” he says aloud, to no one in particular.

How am I going to explain this?

He steps through the now very large hole and stands over All Might, the roles suddenly reversed. “Sensei?” Izuku ignores the reactions of the stray parents and students making their way out of the building. “Are you okay?”

“Geez, my boy! How did you even manage that?” All Might’s eyes light up, and he laughs warmly, still on the ground. “What percentage was that at? I don’t think you’ve ever been able to knock me down like that before!”

“Twenty!” He replies happily, even though his body is now crying because of it.

“Spectacular!” Just as All Might is about to get up, there are new approaching footsteps.

Izuku blinks when he sees them, and it takes a good few seconds for him to actually process who they are. His vision is still swimming from the use of One for All.

“See?” Aizawa says flatly, gesturing to how All Might is sprawled out on the ground, limp. “I told you he’d get himself killed within the hour.”

Kayama rolls her eyes before shoving past him, completely ignoring him. Izuku has the sudden thought that Kayama totally used to shove nerds into lockers.

But whether or not that would make Aizawa the nerd here is the question…

She ruffles Izuku’s hair before twisting to stoop over All Might, hands on her hips. “He’s not dead yet—look at his eyes! There’s still light left in them.” A predatory grin grows on her face. “But I can change that.”

“Please do not!” All Might says hurriedly, as if he doesn’t doubt for one second that his coworker would go through with her words if given the chance. He quickly rises to his feet, blood trickling out of his mouth.

“He’s already halfway there,” Aizawa points out, no fucks given. “Just look at him.”

Izuku throws his teacher a glare, not quite understanding why all of a sudden it’s Hate On All Might Day. This isn’t happening. Not on his watch.

He picks up the handkerchief Yagi dropped when he was slammed through the door and hands it back. The hallways are now empty save for the few of them, so he’s not worried about anyone seeing that something may be wrong.

“Kid, come on. Mic’s pulling the car up front.”

Izuku nods to show he heard, throwing another glare at him. Kayama then kicks Aizawa in the shins for some reason, making what seems to be yet another argument start up, and Izuku couldn’t be any more grateful.

He hesitates a little, trying to decide something. All Might told him to refrain from ever picking a fight like that again, and while Izuku can’t promise anything regarding this, he can say for sure that he won’t be picking another fight anytime soon. He’s much too tired for that.

Izuku could also tell just by the slight warning tone in his mentor’s words that he wasn’t kidding. He wasn’t particularly asking, either. It’s obvious he was just telling Izuku what he now expects from him, which is fine! He doesn’t mind that.

After another moment he turns back to Yagi and dips his head, suddenly shy. “Thank you. For earlier, I mean. You didn’t have to stand up for me like that.”

Yagi’s face contorts in surprise, and his hand comes up to rub at his neck after deflating into his smaller form. “It’s quite alright! I actually did want to talk with Endeavor tonight, you see, but I guess I should’ve learned the other five hundred times I’ve tried that it wouldn’t turn out well. He won’t ever hear me out.”

If he ever gave you the time of day to explain yourself, he wouldn’t hate you so much. He has to keep believing you’re terrible for his stupid fantasies to have any weight.

Izuku thanks his mentor again and wishes him a good night before walking to the front with Aizawa. Kayama is staying a little longer to finish her work (and also probably to tell Principal Nezu about the

door, if the stoat doesn't know already), so now it's just the two of them and the occasional teacher roaming the buildings.

He wishes he could have at least seen Kacchan one more time to say goodbye, even if they'll see each other again in the morning.

"So." Aizawa peers at him cautiously. "What exactly happened with Endeavor that made All Might have to step in?"

Izuku stops in his tracks. He purses his lips, eyes darting first to Aizawa, then to the entrance doors, and back again, a plan forming.

The man's quirk flares up immediately. "Don't you dare start this again—"

Izuku is already making for the safety of the car, praying that Yamada will have mercy.

Sometimes running is better than explaining when you have an angry emo hero as your teacher.

Out of almost all the agencies that sought him out, Izuku finds that he's not impressed with any of them. That's not to say he doesn't think that any of those heroes are respectable or worth it, not at all. It's just that to him, his time as an intern with them wouldn't be very well spent.

None of the choices are clicking with him, and sue him if he sounds a little pretentious by saying this, but come *on.* He thought there would be better opportunities.

The last day he has to choose where he's going to intern is tomorrow. That's the *last* day, which isn't good. Not when he hasn't even narrowed down most of the choices! With only a few left to go through, he's losing hope.

Izuku sits up and swipes a hand down his face, frustrated. This is all so stupid. He hates this: having to choose out of a pile where he's going to go. There's something very… weird about it. It's almost like he's choosing a place to vacation, except the vacation part is just another

word for boot camp.

Fun boot camp. Well, it should be fun. Half of the reason why he's saying no to most of these agencies is because he can already tell his time there won't be exciting enough.

Being engaged is important to him.

Heaving an exaggerated sigh, Izuku flips through the last pages with the utmost irritation and reads them aloud. He won't even bother with reading the specifications under the heroes' names now. It's getting late.

"Random hero I don't like; random hero I don't vibe with; random hero that fucking *chased* me with a boomerang a few months back; random hero with a weird haircut; random hero that gave me cookies one time on patrol—I'm considering this one; Hawks; random hero with—"

Hold on, are we really just gonna skip past that last one?

Izuku is floating. His soul has already escaped him. He has to use *Pull* to yank it back into him before he can truly look back over the pages he skimmed over. And yep, he was not hallucinating this time.

There, listed at the top of the paper, is Hawks' hero agency. What the fucking *fuck?*

At first Izuku is simply confused, because he didn't think Hawks was even taking any interns at this time. He's not that type of guy. Only Tokoyami mentioned getting an invite from him—no one else did. And Izuku doesn't think he remembers there being any other interns listed on the staff at his agency. It's usually just sidekicks and other heroes, mostly bird-themed, so why…

His confusion quickly dissipates when he realizes exactly why this might be happening, however, and his heart drops to his toes. Oh. Shit.

Izuku is up and pacing before he can stop himself, biting at his nails out of nerves. Yeah, he's stupid. Really fucking stupid. Why didn't he think of this before? He could've better prepared himself. He knew Hawks was smart, and he knew he wouldn't let that incident the other night go, so why is he surprised?

He could be overreacting. He could be drawing conclusions that aren't

supposed to be drawn, but dammit now he's getting scared and not even Missy can help him out of this pit of despair.

It's not too far out of the realm of probability that Hawks knows who he is. Not at all. And that's what makes this all worse.

Izuku grabs the paper in a split-second decision and opens the door to the guest room, walking down the hallway with uneven steps.

He needs to tell someone. He needs to tell Aizawa, just in case. He can help. He needs to… he needs…

Izuku stops short at the mouth of the hallway and squeezes his eyes shut, suddenly unsure.

He was already surprised, near the beginning of all this, that he was being allowed to have an internship at all. He thought since it was optional that they would make him either not do one or just stay with one of them as a safety thing—there's no telling who's still after him.

Aizawa admitted that he wants Izuku to stay with him at *his* agency, saying as Yamada would literally have no time to teach him anything at his own agency and since All Might wouldn't be able to do much either, but Izuku argued that that would be a bad idea. Aizawa's agency isn't supposed to be publicly known, and because student internship choices are something easy for the public to access, Izuku doesn't think going there would be the best choice.

Izuku also just didn't want to be shackled by him, truth be told. So they made a deal: Izuku could go to another agency and do whatever he pleased, but he'd have to run it by them first, just as a precaution. Which isn't a *bad* deal, really. He'd expected something like this to happen.

What this deal means for Izuku now is that he kind of has to tell Aizawa about this anyway, even if he's not planning on going to Hawks' agency. This could be a breach of safety, and Izuku knows that he's expected to tell them about those.

Missy accompanies him as he walks out further into the living room, and he forces himself to breathe normally. Hyperventilating won't do him well at this point. He has to put himself together.

It starts here, he knows. The trust thing.

Aizawa is resting on the couch watching TV. He's playing

absentmindedly with Pickles and Meatball, and *dammit.* The one time Izuku sees him enjoying himself and not working and he has to bother him. No wonder Aizawa is so agitated with him sometimes.

He stands near the arm of the couch for a bit, trying to find the right words to start this out. Perhaps he should've rehearsed this.

"What is it, kid?"

Oh. This is not in the script that Izuku didn't even have time to make. He's going off script!

The man looks at him, and it's the *attention* he's giving him that has Izuku wanting to turn right back around and walk away. But then Kacchan's face pops up in his mind and makes him wince. Okay. Yeah. He needs to do this. Not just for this circumstance, but because *it starts here.*

"What… What would you say," Izuku begins, clearing his throat and waiting a lot more time than is probably socially acceptable before continuing, "if I was offered an internship with Hawks?"

There's a beat of silence (even the TV and the cats seem to mute themselves), and then: *"What?"*

Just by that one word Izuku can tell this is bad.

Aizawa springs up from his spot on the couch, making Izuku squeak. "Ah, well, I mean, *hypothetically!* What if he hypothetically—!"

The paper is snatched from his hands, and Izuku briefly wishes for one of Dragon Lady's poison bottles. He could use one of those right about now.

Aizawa reads it over quickly, eyes scanning over the paper once, twice, then three times, before hissing to himself. "Hypothetical my ass, kid. I must've missed this one when I was looking at your votes."

He can't even blame him for cursing at this.

Just then the door to Yamada's studio opens, and Aizawa doesn't waste a second. He calls for him to come over, and Izuku jolts forward in trepidation, panic lighting a fire under his feet.

Oh no. No! Yamada hates Hawks. He's been blaming him for all of his troubles ever since the "drug incident." This isn't going to go over well

for him either.

Izuku tries to stop him from handing over the paper when Yamada approaches, but Aizawa is bigger than him and just holds his hand up high so Izuku can't reach it.

Fucking giants!

Yamada frowns, peering at Izuku in confusion over the top of his glasses as he takes the paper. "What's going on here? It can't be that bad—" *Immediately* his brows fly to his hairline. He looks positively scandalized. *"OH MY GOD."*

In any other situation Izuku would've laughed at the quick change. Instead he wrings his hands together and can only hope that there's going to be a solution to this soon. "Maybe he doesn't mean anything bad by it!" He tries.

"Kiddo, he *kidnapped* you. This isn't what we want at all. What if he knows?"

"No, he kidnapped Rabbit! And it wasn't really kidnapping—!" The look they both give him shuts him up quickly. "Okay, yeah, it was maybe a bit of kidnapping. But—but I am kinda a criminal, so he was within legal grounds!"

Aizawa just covers his face, one hand rubbing at his temples, and Izuku sees Yamada going over the paper again. They all know what this could mean, the idea being far fetched or not, so this is a very awkward situation.

"Sho," Yamada says quietly, the lights from the television reflecting on his frames, and Izuku suddenly feels very small between the two of them.

The underground hero nods in understanding. "I know. I know." He moves his hands away to catch and hold Izuku's eyes. "Midoriya, I don't think I have to explain why this one is a hard *no.* You're not going to him."

Izuku doesn't have the energy to tell him he wasn't even thinking about it. He just frantically shakes his head in agreement, head spinning again. "What's going to happen now?"

The question escapes him before he can really think about it, but once it's out, he doesn't want to take it back. His hands are still wringing

together nervously. The mere idea of Hawks potentially knowing his identity and who he may be living with is terrifying. If he knows, that means the Hero's Commission could know. They could search for him. They could kill him.

They could hurt Yamada and Aizawa. Missy. They could—

Aizawa's hands land on his shoulders, and when Izuku comes back into existence, the man is leaning over him. "There's no reason for you to get upset over this now. You need to go back to bed. It's late."

The suddenness of the words startles him. "What? No, I'm not tired anymore! I need to—!"

"I wasn't asking." He pokes his chest with two fingers before straightening up. "Go. This isn't for you to have to worry about. We'll take care of it, so shoo."

A spike of irritation hits him so strongly that it nearly knocks him off his feet. "What do you mean it's not for me to worry about? It's my fault this is happening! This is *about* me!"

"Son." Yamada's tone is soft but firm. Izuku wishes there was more light in the apartment for him to see his face. "Remember what I said to you that night?" He doesn't wait for a response. "I said that we'd help you, right? No matter what. And that still stands. I promise we'll keep a look out, so please don't worry about this just yet. You're right; it could be nothing at all. We just have to make sure, yeah?"

Izuku hugs himself with his arms and huffs out a breath, still hesitant. Do they really expect him to just go to sleep after this?

"I don't even think there's anything we can do at this moment," Yamada continues, moving closer to him to make sure he understands. "We just have to wait for the morning so we can figure things out. Which means getting yourself worked up over this now is pointless. Getting sleep is more important."

So then why don't you two go to sleep, too?

With both of the men against him like this, Izuku knows he stands no chance. Hands clenching into fists by his side (he's been doing that a lot lately), Izuku grits his teeth and turns around, heading back for the room. He doesn't say goodnight or anything, knowing that if he opens his mouth now he might just be unable to stop.

Once he's calmed down, Izuku slides down his closed door and presses his ear against it, his curiosity and irritation winning out over his shame. If he concentrates hard enough he can just about make out the softest of their whispers.

He knows it's wrong, eavesdropping on them. But dammit it's obvious they wanted him out of the room for some reason, not just so he could rest, and he wants to know why. Missy curls up on his lap, as if to listen as well. This is probably one of the only times where she's not judging him for doing something like this.

"He's going to get hurt, Zashi. Hawks is already on his tail. I told Nezu he shouldn't be allowed to do an internship at all but he said to just let it be, that it'd be fine. Yeah, well, he should take a look at what's happening now."

The rustle of fabric. Yamada must be sitting down on the couch. *"I think an internship will be good experience for him. You can't bubble wrap him, babe. He won't like that, and you know it's not right. Not when the other students get to have them."*

Izuku's face falls. He's talking as if he thinks Izuku will run again if they do something like that. Which hurts, because he promised he wouldn't do that again. Do they not believe him? He berates himself immediately after thinking that. Of course they don't. How many promises has Izuku broken so far? He has to work hard to gain their trust back. He's broken a lot of it with Aizawa especially.

He… he *wants* that trust back. It scares him to not have it.

"We can't keep doing nothing about these sorts of things, Hizashi. We already should've done something more by now to figure out all the things he won't tell us. We have to dig our heels in somewhere."

Izuku's grip tightens on his sweatpants—Aizawa's sweatpants. They're big on him, but he likes them. They're soft.

"Dig our heels in? We already have. We've been doing that since day one. And even just recently we've worked out household rules, haven't we? We've laid down boundaries and we've been pretty clear cut about certain things. He's trying his hardest to adjust and learn how to be a semi-normal kid, Sho. We can't push him too fast or it'll ruin all the progress he's already made."

Progress. Somehow it tastes bittersweet on his tongue.

“I know that. We all need some time. But it’s just…” Izuku can hear his nearly inaudible sigh. *“The less we know, the more danger he’s going to be in 24/7. If we figure at least some things out we might be able to protect him better like you promised. Situations like this won’t happen.”*

“We can’t know that for certain, but you're right. Some things we’re going to have to push him on, but not now. If we push before he’s ready, he’s going to get hurt anyway.” There’s a beat of silence, and Izuku is so focused on trying to wipe the sweat from his eyes that he can’t hear what Aizawa says next, but he can sense Yamada moving just a fraction closer to his husband. *“He’ll be fine.”*

“For now. Who knows when Hawks will decide to reveal what he knows? There’s no way he hasn’t already made the connections.”

“Then we’ll be there for him when it happens. We can protect him. But for now? One step at a time.”

Just one step. It sucks that Izuku hates stairs.

When they get quiet, Izuku pulls away from the door and holds Missy close to his chest before finally climbing into bed. The events from the day have taken a toll on him emotionally, so he’s almost out instantaneously when his head hits the pillow.

He has one more day to choose an agency. And it’s sure as hell not going to be the very passive aggressive Hawks. None of the rest are good choices, though. He’s going to need something else. *Anything* else.

Hopefully luck will swing his way this time.

And unbeknownst to Izuku, just a few miles away an old man is struggling to hit the send button on his computer. He manages to do it after another thirty seconds of incoherent cursing, and he sits back with a huff, his internship pick finally being sent even though it *is* really late. The universe was on his side for this one.

(He came out of retirement for this shit, so it better be worth it.)

The hero looks to the side of his dusty keyboard and eyes the coffee-stained paper laid out before him. The absolutely *despicable* handwriting stares back at him, and Sorahiko feels like hitting something. Well, some *one* would be more appropriate. He already has a target.

It'd be well deserved.

'I found my successor.'

Now, that is a pretty fucking important thing to tell someone, don't you think? And Toshinori told Sorahiko through a letter. A damn *letter!*

The brat wasn't even brave enough to email or text him, which makes Sorahiko roll his eyes. It's been a long time since he was last contacted by his ward; he'd almost be offended if he didn't enjoy the peace and quiet. Toshinori took care of the *main* issues in their lives, so Sorahiko's job was close to being done. There was nothing really for him to do—not at his age, at least.

But now…

'I've already passed it onto him.'

He reads and rereads the sentence multiple times, his eyes twitching. He received the letter not too long ago. Just a week before now, actually. Apparently something bad had happened regarding this *boy,* so Toshinori decided to finally tell Sorahiko about his existence and also about some of what just recently happened to him.

Which is almost laughable considering the fact that Sorahiko already knew about the brat's pick. To him, it was painfully obvious.

He likes to watch the news. The Sports Festival was very entertaining this year for multiple reasons.

Sorahiko clicks onto another tab with no trouble (a miracle, really) and leans back in his chair. The footage he saved replays, the crackly audio being the only sound in the otherwise silent living room.

He stares at this green-haired child, wondering for the fifth time why he looks like he just crawled out from the sewers, and focuses on the red and black lightning that erupts from his freckled skin. He watches the way he fights, the way he speaks and acts, the way he *moves,* and finds himself shaking his head.

“I can already tell he’s been teaching you for a while,” he mutters. “You fight just as recklessly as he does.”

Sorahiko pauses the video during one particular scene. It’s early on in the festival, during the first round with the obstacle course—the one that Midoriya Izuku won.

His scarred palms are reaching toward the camera as he hangs in the air, an almost manic grin on his face that certainly matches with the tone created by the frozen explosions behind him. Sorahiko stares at the palms, thoughts going a hundred miles an hour now.

Stupid, he thinks, something sharp coiling around his stomach. *You’re not just reckless, boy. You’re stupid. And this whole thing is gonna kill me.*

Toshinori sending him this letter was almost like a plea for guidance, whether he knows it or not, and Sorahiko is willing to give it to him this time, just as he always is.

He can’t wait to meet the new successor.

Chapter End Notes

connections have been formed.

this chap is literally this song on yt

(just wanna take this time to say thank you all so much 🥺 we got over 320k hits recently and im just sgdkfkfjgdh absolutely floored. ily guys so much 💕)

w

between worlds

Chapter Notes

december is almost here 😩

(warnings: drowning, slight gore)

also this is gonna be a part of a double update so chap 45 is gonna be released in a day or two!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are hands pressing against the back of Izuku's head.

Fingers dig into his scalp, yanking at his hair and tearing through his skin with sharpened nails.

He's pushed down until he's kneeling, palms flat on the floor. The ground below him feels moist, like it's only just recently rained. But when he looks down, he can't see anything. It's all black here. There's only darkness around him.

Fuck. Are you kidding me?

Trying to calculate how much drugs he had to have accidentally taken before bed to be seeing *this* shit, Izuku closes his eyes and tries to steady his erratic heartbeat.

Get out. Get out. It's not real, so just pull yourself out of this.

More hands join in and the pressure increases, but not just on the outside of his skull, on the inside too. There's something in there, squirming about, eating away at his brain. It's scratching at his flesh, trying to get out, or trying to get in—how would Izuku know the difference? Is this what a parasite feels like? Like those brain-eating amoebas?

He's shoved harder and his face meets the ground with a snap. Hot, sticky blood pours from his nose and pools around his face, wrenching a surprised cry from him. He didn't think he could feel pain like that here. Usually his dreams are muted with some kind of film over them. The pain he experiences then is dull—not sharp, and certainly not like this.

The surprise is enough to have him panicking.

Multiple pairs of hands grab at his clothes and yank, pulling Izuku in every direction. But when he tries to lift his head he's just pushed back down again. His blood stains his shirt and seeps into his curls, and Izuku *hates* it.

He can't breathe. The void beneath him is starting to burn away at his skin like acid, and the heat spreads through him quicker than a wildfire.

Another tug and All Might's shirt rips in half, leaving Izuku's bare torso on display for all the world to see and touch. Nails—no, *talons* dig into his old scars and make them fresh again, and this time Izuku can't help the scream that bubbles up and out of his throat.

"Stop it!" He yells, twisting and writhing on the ground in hopes of dislodging the hold the hands have on him. "Let me—*let go of me!"*

Harsh words are hissed into his ear, but his blood is pounding so hard that he can't make sense of any of them. It's all mush to him.

Something grabs the back of his neck and holds him in place, and now he *really* can't breathe. His hands come up to scratch at whatever is holding him there, but his fingers go through air. He's fighting against nothing.

Here there's just Izuku, the angry, wailing voices, and the ever-expanding darkness. And what a tragic trio they make.

He's yanked forward by the wrists, and his bare stomach slides painfully over the burning floor. It's like he's been thrown over smoldering coals. His confusion increases tenfold, alongside his panic.

He can't die here, right? This isn't real—he's over eighty-nine percent sure of that—or the work of some quirk, so he should be okay! This is just a dream. A very realistic, *terrifying* dream.

With that assumption comes another dreadful thought: will any of the wounds he's receiving here travel over into the real world?

Izuku is at the bottom of the dog pile now. Bodies push him even further into the fire below, and though he can't see them he can still very much feel them. Izuku has lifted up whole boulders before with ease (and many, many fridges; thank you, All Might), but he's still having trouble getting this weight *off* him.

He's stuck and he absolutely despises it because this means his mind is beating the shit out of him and *winning*.

With his clothes being effectively torn to shreds and thrown off somewhere into the void, the only thing left for the hands to grab is hair and skin. Izuku thrashes around even more, trying desperately to stop the invisible attackers from tearing him apart limb from limb.

I'm gonna die. They're going to kill me. Please, please, please.

One for All flickers in response to his silent pleading and Izuku activates it almost immediately, seemingly at the reminder that he has it. His other quirks are quiet, in hiding. It's as if they're afraid they're going to be ripped apart too if they show themselves.

Red lightning erupts from his hands and runs across his body, enveloping him in a neon glow that sharply contrasts with the shadows around him. The power doesn't stop there; it grows bigger and bigger and gets stronger and stronger until Izuku is one huge glittering ball of electricity.

He's like a star, lying in wait. A supernova waiting to happen.

There's a flash of bright white light that's hotter than anything Izuku has ever experienced before, even hotter than the flames he felt that night when his building collapsed, and he has to bite down so hard on his tongue to prevent from outright screeching that he can taste the tangy blood clearly.

All at once, the hands release him. The voices stop growling in his ears and the pressure inside his skull is relieved.

It stops so quickly that Izuku finds himself questioning if it even happened in the first place.

Panting, Izuku lets himself rest there on the ground for a few more moments just to gather himself. This is probably the most interesting thing Izuku has ever dreamed of. But trust him when he says he doesn't ever want to go back to this moment for anything.

One for All…

He sits up, trembling as he turns his hands over to study them. They're not broken. Hell, they're not even sore! It just feels like he touched a live current, but even then there are no marks to show it.

I can use One for All infinitely here? Without injury?

Izuku pauses, wondering if All Might can do the same thing in his dreams. Does he have a time limit there as well, or is he the one who makes the rules?

Movement catches his eye, and Izuku scrambles to his feet immediately, instinctively going for his boots for a knife—only to realize he doesn't have shoes on either. And a *knife?* What?

Izuku hasn't used any of his knives in a long while. He actually can't remember the last time he had to take it out of one of his shoes to protect himself.

With that weird thought hanging heavy at the back of his mind, Izuku wraps his arms around himself to warm up and starts to walk. He doesn't know where he's going, but what he does know is that he has to move. It doesn't matter where.

They're coming back. They're following him.

Izuku can feel their eyes on him from all sides. The hair on his arms and at the back of his neck pricks, standing on end. He shivers, eyes darting around.

Wake up, you idiot. It can't be that hard.

He walks faster, but then the voices start up again far behind him and he's forced to jog instead. God, why can't people just leave him alone? Do they have to be with him even in his dreams?

"Are you guys just that obsessed with me?" Despite the cocky words, Izuku's voice shudders. The air is getting colder all of a sudden, and Izuku wishes faintly he could go back to that blistering heat from before. "Don't you have anyone else to scare?"

Near inaudible footsteps come closer. Circling him. Izuku is at a run now.

There's the beat of leathery wings. Jewelry clashing against other jewelry. Huffs of hot breath. It's in his ears and yet it's not even close to him.

He has to drag *Boost* out in order to run faster, his movements sluggish and unsteady. No matter how fast he's going or how much he wants to *leave,* it's like he's stuck in that one spot. It doesn't help that there's no

light around to even gauge his positions.

By the time he's worked up the courage to try and force one of his other quirks to come out and help, they're already upon him.

Talons wrap around Izuku's middle and easily drag him back, back towards where he originally woke up. This time he can see them. They're a shiny, blinding white, and Izuku feels bile rise in his throat once he processes how long each claw is.

Even while curved, the talons are at least a foot and a half long and three inches in diameter. The tips are sharpened to a fine point, almost like what a candy cane looks like after someone has been sucking on the end for too long.

Wow, weird analogy there, Izuku. Fucking focus!

Izuku scratches against them frantically, meeting his own crazed eyes in the reflection.

His feet slide across the ground, and when Izuku starts to feel the heat again, he jerks harder and throws his hand back. He flicks his fingers with all the desperation of a dying man, and the shock of the airwave has Izuku skidding backward. Except the talons don't release their hold.

If anything, they just cut deeper into his sides and close around him tighter.

It's not until Izuku feels the blood bubbling out of his mouth and streaming down his neck in thick red lines that he realizes he's shouting again.

No. *Screaming.*

He's held in place then, having stopped being dragged backward, and Izuku fires off even more air shots and One for All-powered kicks in retaliation, trying to do anything to loosen the grip the claws have on him. But nothing seems to work.

His quirk is useless. *How* is it useless? It was working against them before! Why is this happening? And why now?

Izuku uses his fists like hammers to try and crack or break off the talons, but he only succeeds in shoving them deeper in. He can't stop though. There's an itch under his skin. Something that's telling him to

run, to leave, to hide before he forgets how to.

Figures outlined in staticky white approach him. Some are tall, some are short. Some are as big as Fatgum while others are as small as Recovery Girl.

He can only focus on a few, his mind being too preoccupied to make space for all the rest. They're speaking so fast it sounds like a constant stream of laughter to Izuku. They're yelling at him so loud it's drowning out his own screams.

As they come closer Izuku's movements grow wilder. More blood spills from his lips, and when he blinks it starts to come out of his eyes too. He can't see anymore, but he can hear them. He can feel them.

Their presence is a hot iron being pressed into his spine, and he *swears* he hears one of them spit his name out like a curse.

When Izuku finally stops, too tired and overwhelmed to do much of anything but hang there and close his eyes, everything seems to stop. It's like the moment after the rain stops on a stormy day. The sudden silence rings in his ears.

The talons slip from around his torso, leaving burning red marks behind. Izuku drops to the floor for the second time and coughs, wiping the back of his hands across his mouth and only succeeding in smearing the crimson around.

It happens in less than a second. When those heavy footsteps approach again, sending chills down Izuku's back at the promise of what's to come, small hands brush against his forehead and ghost across his eyelids.

"Leave him."

Izuku's eyes snap open at the new voice, his vision having been restored, but by then he's alone with nothing but his own blood to keep him company.

He checks his abdomen, only to find that all of his wounds there have stopped bleeding too. He's still sticky and covered in red, but he's not going to die. He's okay.

You weren't going to die in the first place, he thinks to himself in agitation. *You're just dramatic. This is a dream.*

In two minutes, Izuku has gathered himself again and convinced himself to move forward. The chill is back, making goosebumps rise on his skin.

There are no eyes on him this time. He's completely alone, but this void doesn't hurt him like it did last time.

It's just him and… and this water.

Izuku's brows furrow as he comes upon a pool of black sludge. He sees a starry sky in its reflection, and if he looks hard enough he can make out a few of his favorite constellations. The water is moving like it's boiling in a pot, and to Izuku it looks almost unreal. Like it should be a part of someone's quirk.

Like the Sludge Villain, he thinks traitorously.

Green and purple and pink color the void behind the stars, which only makes Izuku even more confused. It's beautiful, don't get him wrong, but it shouldn't exist. Why is it here? In this dark, dangerous place?

He kneels down by his own volition this time, reaching down with a hand to touch it. It doesn't burn him, so he sticks his other hand in too. He tries to wash off the blood matting on his skin, but it doesn't wash off.

Instead, the water turns his blood black on contact and seems to dry it immediately, as if making it a permanent tattoo.

The fuck?

Izuku swishes the sludge around and holds it in his palms, watching it dissipate in his palms and rise above him.

Despite all of Izuku's senses, he reaches for it one more time, curiosity getting the best of him.

And that's his mistake, he'll admit. He deserves what happens next.

A large yellow glove shoots out from inside the depths of the water and grabs his forearm, yanking him in. He's not fast enough to take a breath in or try to prepare his quirks before he's swallowing a mouthful of starry sludge.

It sits in his throat and weighs him even further down. He rips the hand off him and struggles to find any light, anything that'll tell him

which way is up. He knows, logically, that he's not drowning, but it sure feels like it. And it's not like he can just convince his brain not to freak out while his lungs are *bursting* and begging for air.

Bubbles escape him, and Izuku tries to follow them up to wherever they're going, hoping it's to where he was before. But that same gloved hand comes back and wraps around his ankle, pulling him back.

As Izuku sinks further into nothingness, he can't help but ask himself how the fuck he keeps getting put in these shitty situations. His actual life is already entertaining enough; he's not a fan of these dreams.

Dark spots dance in his vision, and Izuku's limbs seem to stop working. It's quiet down here all of a sudden. There's no struggle. No talons.

He sees yellow, then white, and then black.

When Izuku finally, *finally* wakes up, he's choking, but not on blood. He sucks in as much air as he can, trying to quell that floaty feeling he has inside his chest.

He flicks on the lamp to his left and pulls his knees to his chest, happy to see he hasn't carried over any of the injuries he had to the real world. He would've had one hell of a time trying to explain them to his teachers.

It's still dark outside, and when he checks his phone with shaky fingers (having to input his password five times to get it right—he's lucky he didn't lock himself out) he finds that it's only two o'clock.

Yeah. It's going to be a long night.

Izuku closes his eyes once more to keep the world from spinning out of orbit. His fading panic sits like putty in his throat, and it tastes like the water from the pool. It's less disgusting than that of the Sludge Villain's, but it's still not exactly good.

He presses his fingers to his neck, his pulse erratic underneath like he had just finished running a mile.

Izuku wishes he could get up right now and go for an actual run to clear his thoughts, but he doesn't feel like waking Aizawa up to ask. Besides, the man would most likely say no anyway.

And there it is again: that funny feeling. If he were still living alone, Izuku wouldn't have to ask for permission. He could just *go.* He'd be in charge of himself completely and be able to make his own choices.

But maybe that's why it's good he's not alone anymore.

Izuku listens to Missy move around on the opposite side of the room. His door is cracked open, so he's not worried about her wanting to get out. Instead, he's more worried about those voices he heard before.

While he can barely remember the dream itself now, he can still recall those voices vividly. And that *glove.*

His hands are still buzzing with the leftover power of One for All, and it's like he can still feel the grip on his ankle that caused him to drown. And, just as he's starting to feel okay again, something drips down his palm.

With horror dropping like a stone in his stomach, Izuku slowly angles his hand toward the lamplight and lets out a shuddering breath.

He was wrong before. He *is* bleeding. The middle of his palms is burning and throbbing, reminding Izuku just how much he absolutely hates his quirk.

Extract felt left out, huh?

He sighs and quickly makes his way out of the bedroom to clean up his hands in the bathroom. Aizawa would have his ass if he didn't do it properly.

After four minutes of bandaging and listening carefully to make sure he didn't wake up the other two occupants of the apartment, Izuku goes back to the guest room and sighs to himself. This is so stupid, really, and he can't believe he's worrying himself so much over it, but how long has this been going on now? Months?

Shouldn't he put a little more thought into this? So he at least can organize his thoughts, as dumb as they are? Maybe he'll find something out. Maybe he can figure out why this is happening in the first place, the voices and the burning.

He eyes the clock one more time on his phone, knowing that he won't be going back to sleep anytime soon. He has time to kill, so why not? This is long overdue.

Izuku shakes his head in frustration and reaches for his notebook, reminding himself to take his bandages off before going to school.

Is Toshinori old enough to retire? Or at the very least just drop dead without raising any suspicion?

He could go into hiding and pretend that All Might never existed. He could go live under a rock. That sounds nice, actually. Hermit crabs have nice lives, he thinks. What if he becomes a hermit crab?

Toshinori wants a nice shell. He's going to pick out the best one for himself, mark his words. He's going to love his new home and learn how to live his life as a—

"Yagi?" Ishiyama's voice brings him out of his daze, and Toshinori turns to see the cement hero staring at him in concern, an extra coffee in his hand. He outstretches it toward him, one brow raised. "You look disgruntled."

Toshinori coughs and forces out a smile, accepting the coffee even though he probably shouldn't be drinking it. "Oh, thank you, but I'm quite alright! Just had some… *surprising* news is all."

Ishiyama looks past him to see the email open on the screen. Toshinori watches as his face goes from intrigued to surprised and then to confused. "Midoriya got another invite? This late? But the students' picks are supposed to be sent in by the end of today."

Oh, that's not the surprising part.

"I thought the same thing," Toshinori sighs, drumming his fingers along the wood of his desk. "I'm not sure why anyone would wait this long, especially since the heroes had another week to put in their invitations."

Geez, why *would you wait this long, sir? You're killing me.*

Almost literally, he would go so far as to say.

“Well, would you like to go tell him, or should I?” Ishiyama asks.

Toshinori blinks. “I’m sorry?”

“To let Midoriya know he has another invite. Since he hasn’t chosen an agency yet.” Ishiyama lifts a blocky shoulder up in a shrug and takes a sip of his coffee. “Unless he has and I’m not informed?”

“Oh, no! You’re right! Yes, I will go tell him right now.” *What am I even going to say?* “He’ll be happy to hear he has another option.”

Toshinori wishes he could be just as happy, but the only thing he’s feeling right now is dread. Did he do this? Was it the letter he sent him that made his old teacher decide to come out of retirement and reach out to the boy?

The hero has never been more regretful in his entire life. Hell, he can barely *walk* straight. The thought of Midoriya being mentored by Gran Torino? Someone who Toshinori is still scared of to this very day? It’s giving him butterflies, and not the good kind.

He heads to 1-A’s classroom, knowing that it’s lunchtime for them right now, but instead of finding Midoriya there he only sees Aizawa —which is probably the worst thing that could have happened, but really, why is he surprised? This is his coworker’s classroom after all.

Midoriya is back to eating with his classmates now, so perhaps he shouldn’t have even checked here at all.

Aizawa spares him a glance and takes another sip of what looks to be orange jelly.

Ah. That’s probably why he’s eating in here and not with us teachers. It’s a jelly day for him.

Which is bad news for Toshinori.

“Do you need something, Yagi?” Aizawa asks, for once sounding generally neutral.

Toshinori gives a small smile and shuts the door behind him, deciding that he may as well talk with his coworker instead of outright leaving. That would be rude—even if Aizawa would probably appreciate it.

“Good morning, Aizawa! I was just looking for Young Midoriya, but I

can see he's, well, not here so…" He trails off awkwardly, not sure how to go about this.

"Of course you were. He's at lunch, so if you need him you'll find him there. He sits near the east door."

And that's a clear dismissal if he's ever heard one. Toshinori nods and turns to leave, palms sweating now, but then he steels himself. This is *Aizawa* he's talking about. He shouldn't be scared to chat with his coworker, even if it's someone who he highly respects. "Actually, I did want to talk with you about something if you had the time."

Aizawa sets down his jelly pack and gets up to write something on the board: something about deadlines and reminders for the students for next week.

"If you've come to argue with me again about Midoriya's assignments, you can turn back around and stop bothering me." Yep. There it is. "I've already altered his education plans to account for what you brought up last night. I'm cutting back on some of his work."

Okay. Toshinori might deserve some of that harshness. But he's not really bothered by it right now because *what?* Aizawa actually listened to him after all that arguing? He's changing Midoriya's workload?

Something like relief blooms from Toshinori's chest and spreads to the rest of his body. *So you're not as uncooperative as you try to appear, Aizawa.*

"Ah, no, it's not that. But it does have to do with Young Midoriya." Toshinori waits for some sign from Aizawa to continue, but when he gets nothing he decides to go anyway. "But before that, I want to apologize for stepping on your authority last night at the conference. It was wrong of me to do so, especially since technically I wasn't supposed to be there." He rubs the back of his neck, a little flustered. "I know you only do things with his best interest in mind, so I shouldn't have doubted that. I *don't* doubt that."

Young Midoriya just makes me worry more than I thought was even possible.

Toshinori drags his gaze back to meet Aizawa's charcoal eyes, unflinching. "I also should not have struck an argument while he was sitting there listening. It was inappropriate."

Aizawa doesn't say anything for a good five seconds after his

coworker is finished; he just stands there and stares at him, chalk in hand. But just when Toshinori is about to apologize again and duck out of there, entirely embarrassed, Aizawa speaks, his words slow. “Well, it’s not like I was making the situation any better.” He turns and continues writing, the sound of the chalk continuously hitting the board in perfect rhythm with the pounding in Toshinori’s ears. “And it’s fine. You were right.” His voice lowers dramatically. “To some degree.”

Woah. Toshinori suddenly thinks he knows exactly what his ward means whenever he says he’s floating. His head is *touching* the clouds right now. He can barely believe this!

He’s at such a loss for words at Aizawa’s response (he doesn’t think he’s ever heard him apologize like that before—and yes, for Aizawa this certainly counts as an apology) that he’s stuck in his spot with his mouth just opening and closing like a fish. He can’t form any coherent thought other than *what the hell?*

The silence must be too much because Aizawa clears his throat and ruins the delicate air that sat between them. “What is it you wanted to say about Midoriya?”

“Oh, right! Yes!” Toshinori swallows back the lump in his throat and walks closer, feeling a little more confident now. “I know you were tasked with monitoring the invites Young Midoriya was sent, so I figured I should tell you this too. He got another one; it was just sent in this morning.”

Aizawa raises a perfectly plucked brow. This is probably due to Kayama or Yamada. “This morning?”

“Yes. I know it’s very late, but I think this one is worth looking at. It’s… well it’s from my old mentor.” This grabs his coworker’s attention. “He was my teacher while I was still a student here. He retired quite some time ago, but I've been informed he’s recently renewed his teaching license for this occasion specially. And I think, as much as I hate to admit it… he would be good for Young Midoriya. Just as he was good for me.”

“You’re scared of him.” It’s not a question.

Toshinori sputters. “No! Heavens, no! Where would you get that—”

“Your voice is shaking.” Aizawa walks around his desk to stand in front of him, arms crossed. There are dark circles under his eyes, and

Toshinori briefly wonders what must have happened the night before for Aizawa to be looking this tired. “Besides, if he managed to teach *you* at your prime, he must have been pretty scary. What’s his name?”

“You don’t have to be so mean about it,” Toshinori says, still in shock, but he answers the question anyway and watches Aizawa run the name through his mental database. He must not find much, because he just looks back up at Toshinori, eyes narrowing.

“Have you told him?”

It’s obvious what he’s asking. “Not outright, but I’m sure he’ll figure it out. He’s always been quick like that. But don’t worry! He’s trustworthy! He wouldn’t say a word about Young Midoriya’s identity, I assure you. And besides, he’s had a lot of experience with teaching those with enhancement quirks, so I think Young Midoriya really would flourish nicely under his tutelage.”

Sensei has a *lot* of experience with One for All.

Aizawa hums. “You seem pretty dead set on this.”

“Well, it’s not that I want him to choose this one, exactly, it’s just that I think he would be… *safer* with Gran Torino than he would be with any other hero. As I said, he was good for me when I needed help, so I hope this could prove to be the same for him.”

Toshinori isn’t going to sit here and say he absolutely wants Midoriya to choose Gran as his place of internship. That would just be him lying. Aizawa is right, he is kind of scared of his old teacher’s all-knowing ways. But that doesn’t mean he’s going to ignore what this could do for Young Midoriya.

You were there for my master and you stayed for me. And now you’re willing to help me with my own successor.

That’s more than I can ever repay you for.

“If Midoriya chooses it, so be it.” Aizawa yawns and goes back to whatever he was doing. “If you’re sure Gran Torino won’t spill, I have no objections. To me at least this sounds like a much better choice than the other ones Midoriya had.”

Damn. Those other choices must’ve been terrible then.

Toshinori thanks Aizawa and apologizes again before leaving,

deciding to just text Midoriya instead of hunting for him. It would be hard to get Midoriya to come eat lunch with him anyway when he's surrounded by friends. That would be weird.

He digs in his pockets for his phone and clicks on Midoriya's contact while walking back inside the teacher's lounge. The last thing Midoriya sent him was a cute picture of Missy at 3:26 AM, along with a good morning text an hour after that.

When Toshinori checked his phone earlier he didn't notice what time the texts had been sent, but now it's all he can focus on. *My boy, why on earth were you awake at that time?*

He shakes his head and tells himself not to question it just yet, as there are more pressing matters to discuss. His fingers are slow at typing in the words: **talk later after lunch? no rush! :)**

It takes him a whole minute to make that emoji. Or is it called an emoticon? Toshinori can't remember.

The reply is immediate: **teacher's lounge? im coming!!**

Toshinori chokes but doesn't have any time to formulate a response to tell Midoriya he doesn't have to come right this second, as just ten seconds later there's a knock on the door and Midoriya is speed walking in, eyes shining.

"Young Midoriya, did you—did you *run* here? The cafeteria is on the other side of campus!"

"Oh, I wasn't in the cafeteria," Midoriya says cheerfully. He pulls up a chair in front of Toshinori's desk and bites into his half-eaten apple. "I was on the roof with Todoroki. He saw me heading up there for air and wanted to come with, so we just ate lunch up there. But anyway, all I had to do was scale down the building from the outside and jump through the window. Didn't take me very long."

Jesus Christ. Somehow Toshinori doesn't think he should be surprised. He winces, feeling the judgmental eyes of the other teachers on his back. "My boy, what did I tell you about telling me incriminating things like that when others are around?"

"Oh, right! Sorry." Midoriya speaks in a slightly louder tone. "I was in the cafeteria where I was supposed to be, sir! I'm just a fast runner."

And that's how their lunch starts. Toshinori can't even be mad.

He waits until Midoriya has finished his apple to tell him about the late invite, and he even offers the boy some of his own lunch during it. He knows Yamada and Aizawa are feeding him, so he shouldn't worry, it's just that he knows Young Midoriya has a high metabolism so he wants to make sure he's getting *enough.* There's nothing wrong with that!

Midoriya chews slowly on his food as he thinks it over. "Gran Torino," he repeats. "That's…"

"He was my master's best friend, yes. He taught me during my last year here." Toshinori chuckles. "He's a little strict, but he's a great teacher. I think you'd like him."

"I remember you talking about him, it's just…" Midoriya's face is pinched. His brows are furrowed in what Toshinori can only vaguely guess is fear. Or is that shame?

Toshinori leans closer to his ward, voice turning softer. "I know you're reluctant. There is no pressure, my boy. Trust me when I say this is completely up to you. You may already have an agency in mind, and that's perfectly alright."

Midoriya doesn't answer immediately, so Toshinori leaves him to his thinking and makes light conversation while finishing his lunch. He reviews footage of one of their recent battle exercises and forces himself to start grading those. He doesn't want his workload to pile up.

Lunchtime is almost over by the time Midoriya speaks on the matter again, surprising Toshinori. "Does he like donuts?"

Toshinori blinks at the random question, intrigued. "He likes anything and everything sweet. Why do you ask?"

He gets a shrug in reply. "First impressions are important, aren't they? I can win him over with food when I get there."

Toshinori smiles, and he inwardly lets out a big sigh of relief at the confirmation that he's choosing Sorahiko. A spike of dread settles at the pit of his stomach, but Toshinori ignores it for now. He hates to say it, but he's been wanting the validation of his old mentor for a while now. He wants to know how Sensei will feel upon seeing and interacting with his choice of a successor.

Since he will never know his master's opinion on Midoriya, not

anytime soon anyway, he wants—no, *needs* Sorahiko's.

He just hopes Sensei knows what he's getting into with this, because hell, not even Toshinori knows what's going on half the time.

But *this,* he thinks, watching Midoriya use his hair tie to flick a piece of food at Kan, who's on the other side of the room and just trying to grade peacefully, *oughta be good.*

Maybe reconnecting with his mentor is what he's been needing for a while now.

Fifty losses and five wins. Izuku does not like those numbers, no. He does not like them at all.

That's a nine percent chance that Izuku will win any given game, and that's just sad.

He hates the number nine.

Izuku screws up his face and turns away from the game they're playing. He won the previous one, which he's very excited over, but now he's back to losing.

"I'm going to flip the board," he declares, huffing. He's practically already lost, so what's the point?

"Metaphorically?"

Izuku rolls his eyes at Nezu's inquiry. "Obviously. I can't actually do it now."

Nezu tips his head. "And why's that?"

"Because it's rude? And plus that's not good sports—"

He's interrupted by a large crash. The chessboard flies against the vent wall, making Izuku jump, and the pieces go clattering across the ground, rolling for a long way before being stopped. Izuku looks at Nezu with wide eyes, because did he just… flip the board?

In quiet shock, Izuku picks up the pieces alongside the principal and sets the board back up, heart racing.

"As I've said before," Nezu starts, not unkindly, "we can afford to make mistakes here. We can allow ourselves to get upset and start over, as sometimes that is all we can do. We can be better and make up for our mistakes as quickly as we can for the sake of others. And for ourselves." He straightens his queen so she's facing Izuku's own. "That is how it is for those behind the curtains."

Izuku is still so shaken up that this time he doesn't even have a snarky reply to that one. Nezu doesn't comment any further on it, so Izuku is left with that bitter pill to swallow.

Was it my father who flipped the board and caused my building to be attacked? Or was it me?

"Follow me. I'd like to show you something I think you might enjoy."

Nezu leads him out of the vents, and Izuku can't help but perk up a little. "Is it off campus?"

"I'm afraid not. Perhaps some other time we can have ourselves a little adventure."

Izuku doesn't know why he takes that as a silent promise. Maybe it's the way Nezu says it that makes it sound like he's telling him that will become a reality soon enough.

He wants that to become a reality. Nezu is insanely smart and knows a lot of powerful people, so he could probably take Izuku somewhere very nice. Somewhere he can use and somehow benefit off of.

I can't believe you almost drowned him last night.

Izuku's head shoots up from where he was staring at the ground while walking, and he listens intently to the voices again, trying to pick them out.

It was an accident! He let go of my hand and I couldn't grab it again!

You nearly killed him!

Oh, please. You know he can't die here.

We don't know that for sure. Isn't that why you dragged him out of there in the first place? So they wouldn't hurt him again?

A new voice pops up, this one much rougher around the edges. It reminds Izuku of Kacchan. *I still don't think they were being malicious.*

Are you kidding? He was screaming!

So? And then he stopped. He was fine.

Someone slap him, please.

The voice that speaks this time is soft and slightly amused. It's smooth like honey and easy on the ears. *Can we please save this for a time when he is not listening?*

Shit. Izuku catches himself before he can trip over air, cheeks burning. He's been caught.

And just like that, Izuku is shut out from the bickering. It feels similar to that of a door being shut straight in his face.

Does this mean they can choose whether or not Izuku can hear them? That's another thing for him to write down in his notebook.

God, Izuku is losing it more and more each day, and honestly, he couldn't be more curious as to why.

"You have two legs and can walk perfectly fine," Midoriya Izuku grumbles. "Why are you making me carry you?"

Nezu hums from his place on Midoriya's shoulder, unbothered. "It's much better up here, though."

"If you want to be taller so bad just buy some stilts."

"I was informed I scared the students far too much last year when I did that for April Fools. I had to promise not to do that sort of thing again."

Midoriya snorts, and if Nezu could see his face he'd probably see the boy roll his eyes. *Temper, temper,* he inwardly chides. *I wonder which parent you inherited that from, unless that's something you learned yourself.*

After finally arriving at the door to Nezu's office, Midoriya bends down a little so Nezu can put his paw on the scanner, but the principal shakes his head.

"Just say the code aloud and then place your hand on the scanner to register yourself," he instructs. "That way you can get into my office whenever you'd like in the future."

A pause. Midoriya looks back at him with a question in his emerald eyes. "You want me to register myself? Like… actually?"

"It's for your convenience, as you'll likely want to come into my office more often after this visit. It wouldn't be nice to have to wait on me to let you in every single time, wouldn't you agree?"

Midoriya gives him a slightly suspicious look. "That's a weird way to put it, but I guess so." He slowly places his hand on the scanner, as if expecting a shock, but none comes.

"The code is four-nine-nine-four," Nezu says with a little too much enthusiasm.

The student stops for a second and glances back at him, looking highly judgmental. "Really?"

"I decided it was easier to remember," Nezu says.

"That's stupid."

Nezu files that comment away for later, ultimately coming to the conclusion that it would be in both of their best interests if he didn't respond.

Midoriya repeats the code with his palm still pressed on the scanner, successfully registering himself as someone allowed to be in Nezu's office even when he's not there. Truthfully, not very many people have that privilege.

Nezu makes a mental note to look at the scan of the hand later on. Who knows what he'll find.

(He does know, but he'll have plenty of time to check it all out another time, so he forces himself to stay calm.)

Nezu hops down from Midoriya's shoulder and goes straight for his desk. A boiling pot of water is ready for him on the mini burner behind it. He pours himself a generous amount and dips his tea bags in, offering Midoriya his own cup.

Midoriya, knowing by now that it's useless to just not accept it, takes his cup and stares into the darkening liquid. He moves his teabag around with a dark expression, and Nezu briefly wishes he would get an actual answer if he decided to ask Midoriya why he seems so morose.

But he knows he wouldn't, so he stays quiet. He hums a small tune to himself and puts four spoonfuls of sugar into his cup, stirring it around with a satisfied grin that directly contrasts with how Midoriya is feeling.

Wiping off the spoon, he sets it back down delicately next to his other utensils, making sure it's nice and straight. He's not really a stickler for having everything be orderly (in fact he's quite messy most of the time), but there's something about his desk being organized at least that helps him think a little better.

"What," Midoriya begins, eyeing his utensils with a sour face. "Is that your crack spoon?"

Nezu smiles. "Don't be silly. This one's far too shallow."

He waves a paw in the air, and in the next second a panel is popping up from the wall next to them and extending towards Nezu. It has a few buttons and switches on it, none of them labeled, but that will change soon. If Midoriya is going to be here often then he'll need some time to adjust and learn how things work in this office. Nezu will make sure he has all the materials he needs and wants.

"Now, this is what I've been meaning to show you!"

He flips the second to last switch, and the entire middle of the wall to his right slides open. A wall full of weapons is displayed, which—while just as cool but maybe too dangerous—is not what Nezu is talking about. He presses the first button this time, and the weapons wall starts to slide to the right like a Merry Go Round. The next display shown is a shelf full of annotated books, old and new, and Nezu doesn't miss the way Midoriya's fingers twitch and his eyes hungrily follow the wall as it continues on without stopping.

"You'll be able to see the rest of it later in more detail," Nezu assures, waiting for the last display to click into place before clapping his paws together. "But this is most definitely something you'd be more interested in now, I assume!"

Before them is a miniature room filled to the brim with boxes upon boxes of supplies.

Fabrics of all kinds are shoved onto one side of the room while mechanical parts and materials are on the other. Blueprints for random designs and weapons are hanging down from the ceiling, almost resembling that of birthday streamers, and multiple work-in-progresses of Nezu's are strewn about somewhere in the mess.

See? He doesn't mind it when things get messy sometimes.

Midoriya is out of his seat immediately, a gasp leaving his lips. He rushes in without any kind of hesitation, looking giddy all of a sudden.

"This is all real?" He asks as if he can't quite believe it. He reaches out to touch a roll of stretchy black latex, running his hands along everything he can see.

"This is my personal workshop," Nezu answers, walking up beside him. "This is only a fraction of the materials I have available. My storage room is connected to Power Loader's spare classroom, and later I will give you a spare set of keys to access it. But for the moment, you're allowed to use this one whenever you'd like."

Midoriya gives him a look of disbelief, and he keeps looking from Nezu to around the room and back again. "This is the kind of stuff I could only dream about getting my hands on," he says, more to himself than anything.

Nezu watches him bend down to pick up a discarded item on the floor, gauging his reactions.

“I had to save up for months to be able to buy something like this.” His voice isn’t angry, though. Instead, he just sounds in awe. “This is incredible. I can make a new Rabbit costume with this stuff! Oh! I can make a prototype to try out tonight!”

“Indeed. Now, it is a little small in here,” Nezu begins, but Midoriya cuts him off.

“No, it’s perfect. It’s great for privacy, too.”

I had the same thing in mind while designing it. It’s cozy, but that’s the point. It’s too small for most but the perfect size for Nezu and other small creatures. And just by judging the expression on Midoriya’s face, Nezu is sure the boy will do just fine here.

He steps away, letting his student explore more of the workshop. He can’t help but compare the way the boy’s eyes light up every time he sees something cool to that of a child on Christmas Day.

Is this all it takes to make him this excitable? A little bit of creative independence and some supplies? Obviously so. It’s peculiar, but also not quite unexpected. This is just further proving Nezu’s assumptions.

He watches Midoriya glide around the mini-room and grab random things—well, random to Nezu, as he doesn’t know what Midoriya is doing, but probably not random to the boy himself. Midoriya’s eyes are darting around, glinting with a sort of desperation that makes him look almost sick. Nezu can just make out the smallest movements of his lips as he mumbles to himself quickly.

Midoriya clears off the circular workbench in the middle. “Do you have a notebook I can borrow or—oh! Nevermind!” He finds Nezu’s old one fairly quickly and pulls a pen out of his shoe, beginning to scribble notes down. He’s calculating something, his hand moving so quickly across the page that it almost looks like he’s not writing at all. He’s not even looking at it as he goes; he’s taking stock of the materials he has and will probably need in the future for whatever project he’s working on.

He no doubt knows Nezu is watching him, yet he doesn’t look over once. Not anymore.

So very smart. The inside of your mind must be a terrible place.

Midoriya doesn’t waste any time. It’s a skill born out of necessity, he can only guess.

Yes, Nezu will help him, and in turn Midoriya's help won't be allowed to go to waste.

The principal doesn't know what to make of it when a warm, fuzzy feeling starts to spread throughout his veins at the sight of Midoriya excitedly working and drawing something on the chalkboard standing off to the side, only two minutes into being introduced to the workspace.

It feels like hope. Satisfaction. And maybe a little bit of sadness too.

Perhaps he just needs more tea.

Chapter End Notes

nezu: are these?? parental feelings?? OH GOOD HEAVENS 😈

someone should send this song on yt to izuku :'(

o

restitution

Chapter Notes

double update!! make sure you've read chap 44 first :D

(warnings: brief mentions of underage drinking)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took four hours for Izuku to finish it. He's lucky his teachers had to stay late after school anyway or else he wouldn't have been able to try it out tonight.

And wouldn't *that* have been tragic?

Izuku is vibrating with how excited he is. There seems to be a permanent grin on his face as he looks at himself in the mirror, which has never happened before. Earlier he asked Yamada if he could borrow the body mirror, and the man didn't hesitate for even a second before handing it over. He looked surprised to see Izuku even ask for it, but Izuku doesn't blame him.

The new costume isn't nearly as loose as his old one was, but it's not skin tight either. He's not into that stuff, thank you. He likes to be able to breathe and leave people guessing!

His pants and undershirt are black, but his overshirt is a nice, dark crimson. He's swapped his small and outdated jacket out for an oversized one with smaller ears on the hood. The jacket is neon green while the hood itself is the same red as his overshirt. It's a certified attention grabber, and it has a variety of deep pockets on both the outside and inside. On the back of the jacket is Rabbit's old insignia: two large bunny ears, one of them bent slightly with a nick at the tip of it, a few crooked whiskers on each side, and a diamond where the nose of the rabbit would be.

It looks more like graffiti than anything professional, and that's entirely the point. It's simple but recognizable.

Izuku shrugs on the jacket with barely contained giddiness, feeling the weight of the knives he added sitting inside his pockets.

He grabs the knee-high boots Kayama gave to him before leaving school earlier that day and slips into them, tying the green laces as

tight as he can.

Now *this* part is what he's most excited about. Izuku spent most of the time in the workshop working on it: his mask.

The mask is arguably the most important thing out of all the parts of his costume. It not only hides his identity, but it hides his feelings. His old one was good at muffling his voice even without the voice changer, and he was thankful for it. But it was, admittedly, flimsy, and Izuku was always worried about it falling off during a fight.

This is why he tried really hard to perfect this new one given the new supplies he could work with.

He takes out the small case Nezu gave to him and flicks it open, eyes sparkling once he picks it up. It's a more expensive black material than his other one was made out of, and it's a lot slimmer despite its new capabilities.

For one, this mask automatically tightens against his face when he puts it on, so he doesn't have to worry about that. It also has a built-in voice changer *inside* the material, so it's not noticeable at all or distracting on the outside. Izuku was also able to put in a few advanced settings for it, which means he will no longer get dragged for either sounding too robotic-like or too gruff. He can change the pitch and undertones of his voice to his liking depending on how he feels, all just by tapping the side of his face.

He has to keep the villains and heroes alike on their toes.

The mask is highly durable and fire-proof for a good bit of time, so he's actually *hoping* for another encounter with Endeavor outside of school. It would be highly entertaining. *I can't wait to terrorize him.*

But the most impressive part? The fact that it also doubles as a screen.

There are sensors on the inside of the mask that act as a type of facial recognition, so whenever he smiles or grimaces or does anything new with his expression it'll translate over to the outside of the mask in the form of comical white and red LEDs.

It's not detailed, but that's how Izuku wants it. His favorite feature regarding this, however, is that he can also display emotions or expressions on the screen that he's *not* currently feeling.

On the right sleeve of his jacket, there's a blank touchpad that he can fiddle with. All he has to do is tap a certain pattern and the correct expression will be displayed. He can also turn off this feature completely, though, if he's not in the mood for sharing emotions or if he needs to be discreet.

And he won't lie. The touchpad on his forearm? It's something he added in just to remember AINA.

Izuku carefully presses the mask against his face and breathes out in relief when it tightens, giggling at the puff of air that comes out the side of it.

He looks… nice, really. More put together. His new set of red contacts isn't as bright as his old ones were, so it's actually more realistic. He turns around once in the mirror, only wishing he had somehow become taller since the last time he dared look at his reflection.

Too bad he probably won't be growing anytime soon. If not ever.

The simpler costume design makes him seem more mature, but the mask adds that little bit of fun that he strives to keep in his vigilantism.

"Thank you, Nezu," he says to himself, pulling on the final part to the suit: his gloves. He's obsessed with the colorful stitching. "I still hate you, though. Creepy stoat."

But keep giving me money, please.

After pretending to box with Missy for a few minutes, Izuku smushes her cheeks—dodging out of the way of her claws just in time—and rushes out of the bedroom, a bounce to his step.

Yamada is taking something out to thaw in the kitchen while Aizawa is in the living room, still getting ready. He's clipping on his utility belt (there are bits of pink paint still left on it, as Izuku had sort of successfully painted it all cutesy colors to hide the disgusting yellow a few days ago) when Izuku nears.

Aizawa glances at him with a raised brow, looking him up and down when he notices what he's wearing. "That's new."

"Of course it's new!" He smiles brightly, loosening his mask and letting it drop onto his chest for a bit so Aizawa can see his face. "I made it all myself!"

“Oh, I can tell.”

Izuku glares, not liking the amused tone his sensei had, but ultimately decides to not think the worst. “I’m going to assume that’s a compliment. Anyway! Look at my mask! It’s much lighter than my other one, and—ooh, yeah! It has magnets in it that’ll help me keep my hood up when I’m fighting!”

He’s not going to show him everything the mask can do just yet. That’ll be a surprise for some other day, as tonight he’s supposed to be lowkey. He can’t be drawing *too* much attention to himself. That wouldn’t just be bad for him, it would be bad for Aizawa.

“That’s great, kid. Now hold out your hand.”

Izuku does it without thinking, pouting just a little while Aizawa pushes up his sleeve. “You could sound a little more enthusiastic, you know. It wouldn’t kill you to— *ow!* Hey!”

He jerks back, staring at the offending wristband that’s now sitting tight on his skin. It’s dark and matches Izuku’s costume, which would make it near undetectable at night, but *still.* Is this a gift from Aizawa or something? Because if so, Izuku isn’t going to lie, it’s ugly as *fuck.*

“What’d you do that for!” Izuku asks hotly, trying to snap it back off. The material is stretchy but firm, and it won’t budge. Maybe there’s a button to release it or something?

Yamada peeks his head out of the kitchen to see what’s happening, and Aizawa maintains a neutral expression, even as he starts to explain.

“It’s a panic button. If you get lost or need help, just press the square in the center and we’ll be notified.”

Who’s we? Who all would get that information?

Izuku doesn’t ask this just yet, though, as he’s now mildly offended. “I’m not four! I don’t need a *panic button.”*

“That’s great,” Aizawa says flippantly. He turns back to finish getting himself ready. “If you refuse to wear it you can go ahead and take off that new costume of yours, because you can bet your ass you’re not coming on patrols without it.”

Are you shitting me?

Izuku's mouth opens but then closes immediately. He has to grit his teeth to stop a few choice words from leaving him, because he has to be nice here. He has to be respectful and not blow up. That's all. He can't be overly dramatic.

How do you *get to cuss and I can't?*

He fists his gloved hands, shaking now with barely contained irritation. "You're abusing your authority," he tells him through gritted teeth, the words flowing out of him like poison.

Yamada frowns from his spot, and it looks like he's going to say something before Aizawa continues, giving him an unimpressed look. "It's just a safety precaution, Midoriya."

"It's probably a tracker."

Aizawa situates his capture weapon on his neck and sighs, taking Izuku's hand and pressing a certain spot on the underside of the wristband in order to make it pop off. "Look." He holds it in front of Izuku's face and presses one of the small buttons on the side, making a green light blink on for a moment before going off again. "The green means your location is sharing." He presses the button again and a red light flickers on instead. "Press it twice and you'll disappear off the radar. Your location won't show as long as it's red."

Oh. It's that easy to turn off? Why is Aizawa showing this to him?

Aizawa hands it back and raises his brows. "I'd rather you keep it on when you're patrolling alone. But I understand that sometimes you may want privacy." Two fingers press into Izuku's forehead. "So I need to be able to trust that you'll know when the appropriate times are to keep it on or turn it off, alright? Besides, when you press the panic button your location will be shared anyway, regardless of which setting it's on."

That's fair, Izuku thinks hesitantly. He gets a choice in this. Somewhat, at least.

"And kid, look at me. You're not supposed to be out, do you understand? It's still dangerous with what we don't know, so you have to be more cautious than ever before. They might still be hunting you."

Izuku scoffs, turning away from him. "I know that, I'm not—"

“I know you know, and don’t roll your eyes at me. I’m only reminding you not to get hurt.” The corner of his lips quirks up. “Hizashi can’t handle another midnight hospital scare.”

“That’s true,” Yamada calls. “My heart might just give out, so please be safe, ya hear? And I’m not asking.”

It sounds more like a threat, which makes Izuku shiver. Yamada is always scarily serious when it comes to health and safety.

“See? That’s all.” Aizawa flicks his nose and Izuku swats his hand away. The hero doesn’t seem fazed by it, though. “Just stick close, but not too close, and be on watch. Got it?”

Izuku drags his face along the wall next to the door. “Yeah, sure, can we go now?”

It’s Aizawa’s turn to roll his eyes as he flips Izuku’s hood over his face. “Keep asking and I’ll push it back another week.”

“But in a week I’ll still be at my internship!”

He opens the front door and grins, but it’s all teeth. “Exactly.”

Izuku tackles him in the middle to finally get him out the door. Aizawa grunts and calls out a quick goodbye to his husband, promising to text him updates when he can.

And soon they’re out into the cold night air.

Clouds hang heavy in the sky, lit up by the bright light of the moon. Izuku stares at them every few seconds or so, watching their movements and gauging how fast they’re drifting along.

It’s a beautiful night. Izuku is lucky it didn’t rain. It’s supposed to rain all of next week, though, and that’s during his internship. He can only hope things go well then.

Gran Torino is going to mentor me. For a whole week. I’m going to die but it’s going to be so good. It’s going to be the best kind of pain.

One for All gives a little jerk in his mind, and he thinks the quirk is excited for it too.

A scuffle in the distance breaks Izuku out of his thoughts. He jumps down from a neighboring building and lands in a roll next to Aizawa, straightening up immediately to keep pace with him.

He extends *Extract* and finds three quirks grappling with each other deep in an alleyway another street over.

“There’s three of them. Maybe more.” A crease forms between his brows when he feels one of the quirks start to flicker out, and he speeds up. “One’s losing consciousness.”

Aizawa grips one end of his capture weapon and gives him a look. “You can just tell that?”

Oh, shit.

Izuku is an idiot, huh? Actually, don’t answer that. He already knows the answer.

“I, uh, have good hearing?”

Aizawa doesn’t get to answer, as they’re already coming up on the scene of the ongoing crime. They take stock of the situation immediately, but just as they’re about to jump down there’s another scream in the distance.

Izuku’s fingers twitch, ready for a fight. Aizawa must see the hungry look in his eye, as he just jerks his head in the direction of the scream and prepares to dive into the incident below them.

“You take care of that. I got this. And *remember the button.”*

“Aye, aye!” Izuku gives a salute before taking off, hopping right over the alley and heading towards the next place of danger. He’s just happy Aizawa is giving him enough credit to do at least this alone.

It feels freeing. And with the wind whipping at his new jacket and his freshly shampooed hair (he used Yamada’s strawberry-scented stuff), he can say he’s never felt this nice before.

It’s like everything is okay. Right here. Right now. And just for him.

Izuku makes quick work of the potential robbing happening. He snatches the bookbag away from the thief, ties them up using extra thick capture wire that Nezu let him use, and gives it back to the owner, who thanks him profusely.

After a quick autograph (Izuku doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to being asked for one), he’s on his way back to meet up with Aizawa.

And that’s how the majority of their night goes. Since it’s not smart for

them to be seen fighting together the whole time, Aizawa and Izuku split up the disturbances they see and hear. But they still stay relatively close to one another and sometimes tag team if it's a group of villains or whatnot.

It feels like old times. Back before the bombing. Back before the USJ.

It feels like a restart. A chance to redo.

Izuku pulls his mask back up after finishing his smoothie. It was a reward for not getting hurt yet, according to Aizawa, and Izuku isn't going to complain about it.

The more he lets his mind drift, the more sure he becomes.

It starts here, doesn't it? That's what you said. You have to work at it. Build up that trust.

Izuku looks back up at the sky and wishes the stars would come out to give him some guidance. He just needs a little strength even if he already knows what he's going to do.

Shouta would be lying if he said he's not enjoying this.

It's a little chilly out for his liking, but he can deal with it. He can deal with it if it means spending more time with the kid like this, peacefully capturing and sending off criminals. It's a slow night, surprisingly, but Shouta is grateful.

This gives them both more time to relax and take it all in. To explore this new dynamic. While slightly awkward, it's not *completely* new. It's just something to get used to.

Midoriya is already finished with his smoothie and is fidgeting with his hands, his legs swinging back and forth over the edge of the ten story building. He's obviously nervous, but about what?

Shouta only ever sees that look on his face when the boy is

contemplating something—or when he's thinking about pulling a prank that has a low-reward but high-consequence.

"Kid?" He prompts, and Midoriya blinks back to himself. He stares hard at Shouta, and Shouta stares back. "Got something you need to say?"

Suddenly Midoriya can't seem to look him in the eye for some reason. "I… can I ask you something?"

Shouta feels tempted to say that he already did, just because that's what Hizashi says constantly to them, but he stops himself just in time and instead waits for the kid to continue.

"That night when I asked you about clubs, I wanted to see if you would go to one with me."

Shouta blinks. Once. Twice.

"Not *that* kind of club!" He continues, his cheeks reddening. "Well, I mean, it *is* a bar and it *does* have half naked people come through sometimes, but that's not what it's for! It's, ah, a gathering place! Of villains and vigilantes! And even heroes sometimes." Midoriya stares off into space, something dark flashing in his eyes. "They serve nice wine."

Shouta is *this* close to sending the boy home. (His fingers are touching.)

"Not that I would know what it tastes like!" He corrects hurriedly, the epitome of innocence. He turns away again, picking at a thread that's already coming loose on his new pants. Shouta wonders just how long it took him to make this all today. "I just… I wanted to take you so you could understand at least partially why I do what I do. It's… that place is important to me."

And you want to share it with me? Shouta feels something drop into his stomach. This kid has come a long way, hasn't he? Time is flying so fast.

"It's a gathering place," he echoes, just to be sure, and Midoriya nods in confirmation.

"Yeah. Like a lounge, I'd say? With food and bets and events and stuff."

Huh. “You said there were villains there too?” What Shouta really wants to ask is which ones Midoriya has interacted with, but he doesn’t. He’s opening up, so he doesn’t want to shut the conversation down too soon.

“Yeah! But not like, really really bad ones. You have to be a member to get in, and there’s a bunch of rules you have to follow and abide by if you want to keep your benefits. So generally most of the people there are okay and not, like, *terrible* people.” Midoriya must see the blank expression he has on the word *benefits,* as he starts to elaborate immediately. “You get protection as long as you’re a part of the Club. You can’t get killed or attacked by another member, for one. And you can expect team ups and people to have your back when you need it. All you gotta do is ask,” he says, and Shouta hums in reply.

So really it’s like a small agency filled with a variety of different people with different skill sets. They just don’t have to abide by the same rules actual heroes do.

It’s a place with some leeway. No wonder Midoriya likes it so much. “Have they ever hurt you?” He asks suddenly. “I can’t imagine they’d take kindly to your age.”

Midoriya shakes his head and moves his mask to the side. “No, actually. Some of them don’t like me, but they can’t do anything about it unless they want to renounce their membership. There’s also a strict no fighting policy inside the buildings unless you’re in the designated battle arenas.” He winces. “Well, no fighting unless they’ve broken the rules. And then it’s free game.”

He sounds like he’s speaking from experience. Hopefully Shouta can remind himself to ask about that in the future.

“You wanted to take me there? Tonight?”

The panic on his face increases tenfold. “If that was okay?”

Midoriya is acting shy precisely because he’s sharing such a large part of himself. Shouta needs to be careful, but he also can’t pass this up.

He gets up and pops his back, holding out an arm and wondering if he’s about to make a big mistake. “Lead the way, Rabbit.”

The widest grin spreads across Midoriya’s face. He looks about as excited as he did in their apartment when he was showing off his suit. There’s some hesitance somewhere in there, but overall the kid looks

like he's comforted by the fact Shouta is coming with him. "Yeah, okay. Yeah! It's this way!"

Shouta *really* does not want to regret this, but he has a feeling something interesting is going to come to light.

It's only when they're on the way there that Shouta realizes something. "I'm not a member, so you sure I'll be allowed in?"

Midoriya waves him off. "Oh, don't worry about that. The Club gets more members by each existing one inviting more people. We each get three invites per year to hand out. Usually a member would write down who they want to invite on one of our slips and let the Board approve of it first, but since I am a *part* of the board, I don't have to go through that. I also don't have a limit to how many people I can invite." He says that last part a little quieter than the rest. "As long as I'm with you when we walk in, no one will bother you about it and you'll be considered a member." He pauses awkwardly. "Well, If that's what you want."

Shouta doesn't comment on the board part and instead adds that to his ever-growing list of questions to be asked later.

"We'll see," is all Shouta says.

He very much doubts he'll want to become an actual member, but if this is something he can use to better help protect people—to protect Midoriya—why wouldn't he do it?

It's just logical.

It's surprisingly a long way from the more dense area in the city. When they're apparently a few blocks from it, Midoriya pauses to fix his hair in the mirror of a random car and wipes the dirt off his face.

"Really?" Shouta asks, voice dripping with disbelief.

"Yeah! I've gotta look presentable in there, you know. *Some* people actually have a reputation to uphold."

Shouta doesn't deign with a reaction. "You're just going to cover your hair with your hood anyway. No one will see it."

"It's the *principle."*

The boy then proceeds to get the stray cat hair and dust off his

costume, and he smacks at his rabbit ears to get them to straighten up again.

Shouta keeps his hands in his pockets, away from the chill. “You gonna iron it, too?”

“Why, do you see an outlet?”

If it weren’t for the months he’s spent working with and teaching Midoriya, Shouta probably wouldn’t have been able to guess he was joking.

His guard only increases as they get close, and Shouta watches their surroundings closely. He doesn’t see anyone that could pose a threat (he actually doesn’t see anyone at all), but it’s never bad to be too careful.

“Who invited you?”

Midoriya leaves off his own perimeter-checking to glance at him. “What?”

“You said the only way to be a member is if you get invited by another person. So, who invited you? And are they still there?”

And could he meet them, is what he’s really asking. He’s just asking for a friend.

He doesn’t answer immediately, which is what clues Shouta in that this was a dangerous thing to ask. *Come on, kid. I can only help you here.*

Midoriya looks away again, his red eyes shifting to stare up at the sky. “No. He left a long time ago, and for good reason too. He would’ve been kicked out that same day anyway.”

“Violation of rules?” He guesses.

“You could say that. Mass murder is generally frowned upon at the Club.”

It’s said so casually that Shouta almost doesn’t process it, as Midoriya is still walking along. “What the hell? Mass—?” His mind does a factory reset. “Who was it?”

“I forgot the name.”

That's such bullshit, but Shouta rolls with it. "Would I know them?"

This earns him a snort, but it's a little shaky. Shouta wonders if Midoriya regrets even bringing this up. "I'd say so. I think you'll hate me when I tell you."

"Just t—" Shouta cuts himself off. Hate? Why would he hate him? His frustration deflates immediately, like a balloon that just popped. Is it really that bad?

And he said *when* I'll tell you. Not if. Which means Midoriya *will* tell him. Maybe even later tonight. Just not now.

While Shouta probably could make the kid tell him right this moment, he doesn't. He's still stuck on the whole *you'll hate me* part. He doesn't know what gave Midoriya the impression that he'd hate him for something like this, but he wants to find out eventually. He wants to make sure he'll never think that again.

Midoriya has never been this open with sensitive stuff, so the fact he's even saying *when* instead of *if* is progress.

Shouta gives him a look that promises that this isn't over, but Midoriya just shrugs, making Shouta sigh.

"How many have you invited so far?" He asks, changing the topic.

"Three."

"Including me?"

"Nope!" Midoriya pops the 'p'.

"Were they just other vigilantes?"

"They each came from different backgrounds, but I guess, yeah." His eyes go wide, as if remembering something. "Wait, no! One of them wasn't."

Shouta wills himself some more patience. "Can you be more specific?"

This time, his student throws him a look. "You know, you sure are asking a lot of questions for a hero who doesn't like talking."

"And you've sure got quite the attitude for a kid who's *this* close to being sent home early for keeping so many secrets. Now answer the question."

Midoriya pouts. “Two were vigilantes, the other was a new underground hero.”

Hero. Shouta figures he shouldn’t be surprised.

They come upon an old, raggedy building in between a bank and a doggy daycare center soon after, making Shouta question if the kid is actually in his right mind tonight. “Really? This is it?”

“What did you expect? A big building with a banner saying *Villains' Hideout—Criminals Needed* ?”

Obviously not. But Shouta had at least expected it to be more… guarded. There’s not a soul around in this town. If he didn’t know better he’d even say this place was deserted completely.

Midoriya, ever the mind-reader, just turns to him and tips his head. “Don’t worry. You can’t see them, but they can see us.”

“What.”

“Come on! I’ll lead ya in.” There’s a pregnant pause spent with Midoriya seeming to reevaluate his entire life. “I kinda have to if you don’t wanna die. Do you?”

That’s great to know. “Not today, no.”

“Great!” Midoriya’s faux cheerfulness is enough to give Shouta a headache, but he figures he’ll have to get used to it quickly if he wants to get through the night.

He sticks close to his student’s side, still keeping out an eye for anyone around, and watches as Midoriya raises a thumbs up to a camera somewhere in the darkness. He uses his hands to sign *plus one,* and after a moment the billboard on top of the building lights up with the words *Law Firm.* It flickers out after only three seconds, and they continue forward.

Shouta is just even more confused, because that’s the most cliché shit he’s ever seen. Hizashi would get a kick out of this. *How has this place not been figured out?*

“The Board jumps around from place to place so they won’t get cornered,” Midoriya says to him, voice now much lower as they approach the makeshift front entrance. “They sometimes take refuge at the smaller locations that aren’t bothered as much or known, just as

a safety precaution."

Which means the Big Bosses of this entire organized crime system could be anywhere. Shouta makes a note to research more about them when he gets extra time. Maybe some of his coworkers will have a clue.

He doesn't want to take them down or anything, not only because he's sure they have very nice bodyguards (assuming the board members are not already top ranked due to their skills or quirks), but because Midoriya said *he's* a member of them too.

What his position is, Shouta doesn't know. But maybe after this he can ask. Or it'll become clear to him soon.

"Don't use your quirk on any of them," Midoriya adds, securing his mask one last time. "They don't like that very much. And don't start any arguments; they'll just laugh. They don't take newcomers seriously at first."

Great. This should be fun.

Best believe he has Detective Tsukauchi on speed dial just in case.

When they walk in, Midoriya goes first. It's pretty packed, and people go quiet when they see Shouta following, but after a few seconds the chatter goes back to normal. He can still feel all of their eyes on him, though. And for all he knows they could be talking about him.

It doesn't smell like cigarettes or sweat like Shouta had expected. In fact, it smells rather nice. And just from what Shouta can see it looks to be kept pretty clean. The floor is freshly polished and the tables are shiny. Not one chair or table is in disarray, which is more than what most clubs or bars can say.

This is for sure a place that people care about. Shouta wonders who's in charge of cleaning it, or if they all just clean up after themselves like in most schools and establishments.

The strong scent of alcohol burns his nose, and Shouta eyes the large bar at the back of the room, following Midoriya through the club. He bets they don't ID anyone here.

Someone sticks their leg out to trip Midoriya, and Shouta straightens up, his guard increasing exponentially just at that movement, but Midoriya just hops over it and laughs goodnaturedly. He fist bumps

the man, looking not at all worried or alarmed. The guy laughs with him and claps him on the back before letting him go.

Midoriya interacts with a few more people like this, with Shouta acting just as his shadow. He looks at ease here. In fact, it looks like he feels safer in here than he did out there on the streets.

Which should *also* not be too surprising for Shouta.

“You’re gonna embarrass me if you keep walking around like that.” Midoriya elbows him lightly. “Look around! Talk to people! Everyone here is friendly! Well, except that one guy in the corner. He’s always a grouch and very mysterious. Ooh! And the lady at that table over there. It’s best to just, you know, steer clear from them.”

Wow. It feels like Shouta has just been shooed away to go make some friends. Is he more offended at the idea that Midoriya thinks he’s going to embarrass him or because Midoriya is treating him like he’s new at this?

He *is* new here, but that is not the point. He’s going to have to get used to being at the bottom of the barrel in this place.

And so Shouta walks a little further behind Midoriya, keeping space between them. He doesn’t talk to anyone except for a few curt nods in greeting and muttered *hey’s.* Is this how he should keep a low profile here?

It doesn’t seem to be working, though, as now there are even more people looking at him. *Okay. New plan. Adapt.*

He’s just about to go sit next to the man Midoriya told him not to approach (he’s seventy percent sure he knows that person from work, but it could just be the lighting in here), when Shouta notices something on the blackboard above the bar.

And this? Yeah, this is almost enough for Shouta to grab Midoriya’s wrist and drag his ass out of here.

There’s a *death pool?*

His eyes bulge when he sees that Rabbit’s name is close to the top. A *hundred and seventy* people are betting on him to die in the next two weeks. That’s… too much. Way too much for Shouta’s comfort.

“It’s almost like they want you dead,” he mutters as Midoriya comes

up beside him again.

“Some do!” He says cheerfully. “They actually threw a party when I disappeared for a week. They thought I kicked the bucket.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better.”

Midoriya just shrugs. “There’s a reason I already have a written will here.”

And then the kid sees someone he knows and bounces off, leaving Shouta to process that clusterfuck. Jesus, it’s only been two minutes in here and he’s about to explode. It’s all so underwhelming but also horrifying at the same time.

This is where he was going after their patrols? All those times?

“Hey, you new here?” A bald man with big, burly arms asks. There’s a scar that runs from his temple all the way down to his neck, disappearing into his shirt. *Intimidating.*

Shouta folds his arms to appear non-threatening. “It’s my first time,” he admits, voice neutral.

The man looks like he just won the lottery. “Alright then. You wanna spar? I’ll give you your first taste of what it's like here with us.”

Shouta blinks. He knows it’s not a threat, that the guy is actually being sort of kind, but geez if those words don’t make his heart race. “Thanks, but I don’t have a lot of time. Later, maybe?” He reaches out with a hand before the other can respond negatively to his denial. “I’m Eraser.”

The man doesn’t hesitate in completing the handshake, his grip firm. His hand is *so* much bigger than Shouta’s. It reminds him of All Might. “Call me Strips.”

A name that Shouta recognizes from his time of looking over criminal records with Tsukauchi. He’ll remember it for sure.

“And later’s fine. I’ll hold you to that.” He gives a shark-like grin before returning back to his table.

One down. Just infinity to go.

Now that Strips seems to have broken the ice, others come up or wave Shouta over to introduce themselves. Some are energetic and similar

in nature to Rabbit while others are just as quiet as Shouta is.

A few refuse to acknowledge him at all, which is fine. More than fine.

His quirk flares in discomfort at times, and he has to push the urge to activate it down. While it's a safety thing for him, Midoriya said not to use it on other people. Not here. He's allowed to activate it all he wants as long as it doesn't affect another person.

The entire time he converses, Shouta slowly makes his way back to where his student is currently chatting with a group of people. He's been keeping an ear trained on him at all times, and that proves to have been the right choice early on.

He hears someone challenge Midoriya to a fight in the ring in a similar manner to how Strips did, and Shouta's head snaps over. He sees Midoriya bouncing up on his toes in excitement, and Shouta is already speed walking toward him.

"Oh, yeah! I'd love—"

" *No,"* Shouta says loudly before he can think better of it. And even with him saying that one word, everyone seems to hear it. All the chatter ceases as everyone stares at him, and the earth stops its spinning to witness what happens next.

Now having the attention of the entire bar, Shouta forces himself to look calmer even if his heart is beating out of his chest. He knows for a fact some of the people in here know who he is. He can recognize some and even pick them out by name, as he's thrown them in jail once before already. Others seem to not recognize him at all, but the ones who do lean back in their chairs and watch with glittering eyes.

(A few duck out and try to sneak out the back door, but Shouta pays them no mind. He can see the way Midoriya follows their movements, though, so he's not the only one who noticed.)

The man who asked Rabbit for a duel puffs his chest out, looking irritated, and Shouta tries to backtrack. This is not the place to start acting like he has any authority. Being a hero means close to nothing here, at least as face value.

"No. Sorry, but he won't be fighting tonight."

Midoriya is glaring daggers at him now. His gaze is so intense that Shouta is sure he'd be capable of burning holes through his shirt.

Challenger wrinkles his nose. “And why not?”

Because he’s a kid and you’re about three times his size. You’re not laying your hands on him unless you want me to put you through a wall.

“Because we have to leave here in a few minutes,” he says instead, lightly brushing Midoriya’s shoulder in response to the boy’s silent warning. “We’ll be late.”

“Oh, come on,” Midoriya says, still sounding unperturbed and energetic. “I guarantee it’ll take less than a minute! This guy’s not much of a fighter.” He gives his would-be opponent a sly look, teasing him—effectively bringing the potential tension down and keeping the attention on himself instead of Shouta.

Challenger takes the bait and rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Next time I see ya you're going in that ring no matter if I’ve gotta teleport you in there or not. I've been waiting for a month.”

Teleportation quirk, he notes.

Midoriya finger guns him. “Gotcha! Rain check established.” Shouta steers them away into a less populated area of the building before the conversation can continue, and Midoriya shrugs him off and gives him a dirty look. “It’s just a spar, you know. He wouldn’t actually hurt me beyond repair. And besides, I’ve fought him loads of times. I would’ve won, easy peasy.”

“That’s great, but still no.”

“You’re no fun.”

“No, you’re just reckless.”

Another sigh is dragged out of Midoriya’s mouth. He looks like he’s going to complain, but he must see the guarded, almost scared expression on Shouta’s face, as he lets it go rather quickly.

“Come on,” he says quietly. “You haven’t even met my friend yet.”

“Friend?” How can he have friends here? Is he meaning *true* friends or just acquaintances?

Midoriya takes him through a few doorways and directs him to the bar again, and Shouta enjoys this room a lot more. There’s less people in this one. Do they separate themselves into little factions? Do they

have their own groups or is it all coincidental?

A woman is busy working a cash register behind the counter and giving out pamphlets to certain people, and Shouta is pleasantly surprised when Midoriya introduces her as his best friend here.

“Hey, this is Dragon Lady! Dragon Lady, meet Eraser.”

“That’s not my name,” she says, unimpressed, and Shouta is suddenly reminded of Ryukyu. She looks similar to her. Dragon Lady slides her gaze over to his and a mini staring contest ensues. Midoriya looks back and forth comically between the two of them, like a scientist studying two specimens, and after another few seconds pass she looks to Midoriya, taking out a gray cloth and wiping her horns with it. “This the hero that caught you?”

The boy gawks. “I told you already I didn’t get caught! He’s my… my sidekick.”

Shouta can’t help the snort that escapes him at that, and Dragon Lady laughs too. “Yeah, sure. Can I see your hero ID?” She asks, directing that last part towards Shouta.

He hesitates, not able to tell if she’s joking, but Midoriya jumps in with a nervous laugh. “Ah, ah! None of that! I promise he’s the real deal. We don’t have to go flaunting his personal stuff.”

The lady just smiles. “I’m kidding. Since this is your first time here, the drinks are on us. What do you want?”

Apparently they like to give out free alcohol here. Either that or this is a trap. A test.

“I’m fine,” he tells her, even though he wouldn’t have minded a small drink. Nothing alcoholic, of course, as he’s still technically on duty, but an orange or cranberry juice would’ve been nice. But instead of calling her back, as she already looks busy enough, he just watches her use the rag to gather up the liquid building on the tips of her horns.

She then puts the liquid into little vials on the back counter, and she labels them with a marker.

The lightbulb suddenly goes off in his brain. Poison. Her horns can secrete *poison,* and she’s selling it right now. Depending on what kind of poison it is and if it’s fatal or not, that quirk could easily be

considered very strong.

“Pretty cool, isn’t it?” Midoriya whispers, and Shouta nods.

Dragon Lady then brings him a water and something in a shot glass after she’s done anyway, and he wrinkles his nose. “Thanks.”

Midoriya reaches for the shot glass when she leaves and Shouta swats his hand away, glaring at him.

“It’s not alcohol!” Midoriya says immediately, affronted. “That’s just what she brings me to make me look like an adult here. It’s just Sprite! Look! You can even see the bubbles.”

For a moment he’s not sure if he believes him, but he doesn’t have much of a choice when Dragon Lady comes back around the corner and Midoriya snatches it while he’s distracted.

She has more bottles in her hands—and that’s when he notices her long, sharp nails. She reminds Shouta suddenly of Ashido and her power.

The bottles are not that expensive, at least not to Shouta. And that’s saying something, as Shouta is known to be very cheap. “One of my partners at work uses this,” he says, pointing to the smaller vials.

“They must come here then, as I only sell it in this location. It wouldn’t surprise me. There’s plenty of low spotlight heroes who hang about to maintain the order,” Dragon Lady says, and Midoriya narrows eyes suddenly.

“I knew it.”

Shouta looks at him in question, but Midoriya ignores him. He looks irritated with himself, but he shakes himself out of it.

“Hey, any new arrivals in the back?”

The lady points to the wall and clicks a button on the side of the counter so a panel can pop off and reveal another wall underneath. It’s full of so many weapons that Shouta thinks even Nezu would get jealous.

She hands Midoriya a gun off the wall, making Shouta stiffen.

“Oh my god!” The vigilante runs his hands along the side, looking excited again. “This is for tranqs, yeah? I smell sleeping powder.”

“You got it. These ones go in pretty far, though. You want it?”

“How much?” Midoriya asks, and Shouta’s eye twitches.

“You’re not getting that,” he says, shaking his head as he eyes some of the other support items on the wall. There are knives and large whips with electric spikes on them. Boomerangs. Grenades. Splintered bats. There’s even a flamethrower hanging at the very top! Actually, it looks like Rabbit’s old one—his watermark is still on the side of it. He must’ve sold it for a high price.

“Oh, yeah?” Midoriya twirls the gun around with a loose wrist and crosses one leg over the other, a silent challenge. “Who says?”

“I do. Now stop playing around with it before you hurt somebody.”

“It’s empty,” he counters, as if it’s obvious even though he didn’t check beforehand. “So no danger here.”

“Even still. You’re supposed to treat every gun like it’s loaded. You know better.” The warning in his tone must hit because Midoriya groans and places it back gently on the table for Dragon Lady to take.

“Fine! Sheesh, I can’t take you anywhere.” He puts a hand up in front of his mouth and whispers loudly to the lady. “Keep it for me the next time I can come here without Mr. Buzzkill around.”

Shouta’s eye twitches but he lets it be. He knows he’s been nitpicking the entire time but *dammit* can you actually blame him? He’s been on edge for the majority of this visit.

When Midoriya goes to chat with some of his other acquaintances, Shouta is left to have small talk with Kaida—which is what Dragon Lady tells him is her actual name nowadays. It’s fitting, of course.

He decides he quite likes her. She’s not overwhelming or exhausting to talk to; a rare occurrence for someone like Shouta. She has the same vibes Shouta does, and for that he’s grateful. He can survive this place if she’s here to keep him sane. She’s been dealing with Rabbit’s shenanigans for quite a bit of time, so that’s another thing they have in common.

It’s when ten minutes have come and passed by that Shouta thinks it’s time to go. They’ve gotta be heading back now anyway.

He finds Midoriya staring up at a large wall that has a bunch of jobs

posted on it. Each flyer and pamphlet has contact information, phone numbers and IDs, and photos. It's the kind of stuff that Shouta would only see in the station or at his own agency.

"This is where we get to sort through some jobs." Midoriya gestures to the far left of the wall. "That's where the more trivial matters go, like lost pets or stolen wallets. The more high level and dangerous the job is, the more to the right it'll be. And the higher up on the wall, the more money is being offered for completion."

It makes sense. That's why most of the ones that are higher up are on the right side. There are a few outliers on the left, but even as they speak some people come up and take the notes and files down to look over. They don't put them back up, so Shouta can only guess they 'officially' took that job.

"Which ones do you usually take?" He asks, curious now.

Midoriya suddenly stiffens and ducks his head, brows furrowed. "It, uh, all depends, really. I want to make sure I'm not overlooking things on the left side but I also want to make sure I can get enough money and be able to keep upgrading my supplies. I would usually go for the more dangerous ones first, and depending on how long it would take me to complete it I would take the lower jobs for easy cash. Middle area is good. That's usually tracking someone, working against stalkers, having to frame a guy, finding clues for missing people, stuff like that."

It's the way he says it like it's no big deal that has Shouta's chest hurting. He's a good kid, isn't he? The damned best. He just might have too big of a heart sometimes.

Midoriya scans over the more dangerous ones while Shouta goes for the middle and lower sections. He takes one off the top and flips open the file.

It's a missing person case. The boy pictured is young with green hair just like Midoriya's, but it's more neon than dark and isn't curly at all. He couldn't be more than about fourteen. And now that Shouta is reading the name and place last seen, he can recall seeing the case on the news a while ago. Four months ago, he thinks. *Four*.

That's a long time. So still no sign of him, huh? It makes sense that the parents would be desperate enough to spread the word anywhere to get help. Even if they're enlisting the help of villains.

This place is a necessary evil.

Okay. The Club is like Midoriya said. It isn't as bad as people may think. It does good things in bad ways and sometimes for bad reasons, but the good has to outweigh all that bad at some point, right?

Midoriya peeks over his shoulder by standing on his tiptoes. His eyes scan the page quickly for the key details, seemingly used to this by now. "I know someone from that area who has eyes in the sky. I can get their help and send them the details. They're more efficient in that district than I am."

He takes out his phone and snaps a picture, creating a new contact to send it to. Shouta watches with even more curiosity now. He memorized all of his clients and helpers' details? From before the explosion happened? He knows their phone numbers?

After just a few seconds the boy gets a reply back and Midoriya is nodding and stuffing his phone back into his pocket.

He walks off to look at other ones and begins to repeat the process. Just like that. Like a bird seeing something shiny and going off to the next immediately after.

Shouta can hear him muttering to himself. "It's supposed to happen in a week and a half… my internship will only last a week so I'll be ready by then to help. I can intercept them… on this side. No, this one would be better. I just have to prepare better." He digs out his phone, takes a picture, and moves on.

And *this* is why half the country loves Rabbit, Shouta realizes suddenly, stupidly. This kid has saved so many people, so many lives, just by existing and being who he is.

His green hair has never looked more blue to Shouta.

It's past midnight already, and Shouta has to drag the boy to get him to even get close to the exit. "Hizashi is staying up for us," he tells him lowly. "We don't want to keep him waiting. Besides, it's a long day tomorrow."

"Hey, Eraserhead."

Now this is just an example of Shouta's shit luck. Actually, he's not blaming this on himself this time. He's blaming *Midoriya* for taking too long.

A new guy with red hair calls out to him, using his full hero name instead of the shortened version he gave out. That's what tells him this is about to get twisted. He forces himself not to get worked up for the nth time that day and breathes in deeply before turning to face the person who spoke. "Yes?"

"I heard this is your first time here, yeah?"

Shouta crosses his arms and nods. He watches how the guy, who must be just a little older than Shouta himself, looks back and forth between him and Midoriya, connecting the dots.

"Well, this oughta be fun. The champion himself invited you, so we'll see how you perform in the ring."

"Champion?" Shouta echoes at the same time that Midoriya says *ring?*

Red Hair frowns, sarcasm oozing off his tongue. "Aw, Rabbit, don't tell me you forgot! You really didn't tell your friend here about what happens to rookies on their first day? I'd have thought you wouldn't have been able to forget *your* first match."

First match. Rookie. The pieces fall into place quickly enough, and Shouta slowly turns to Midoriya with death in his eyes, and Midoriya puts his hands up in front of himself with a guilty laugh. "Okay, yeah, I did forget to tell you one thing…"

"Really. The *hazing* part is the one thing you forget?"

They're attracting a crowd now. Red Hair is wearing a shit eating grin now. "You just did this man a disservice by making him go in blind, Rabbit. You should be ashamed. This is great news for us and bad news for him." He stands up on the seat of an empty table, easily taking the stage. "Consider This your *formal* induction into the Club, Mr. Eraserhead."

In other words: he has to do this. Is this some kind of rule? Midoriya did it, so does that mean everyone does it when they join? Dammit. If they just have to fight one time on their first day, Shouta should have just said yes to that first guy and got it over with.

It's not a fighting kind of night for him. Not anymore.

But now the throngs of people are chanting for him to go to the back, to get in the ring, and Shouta doesn't think he has much of a choice.

Midoriya is a quiet presence by his side now. He must still be feeling guilty. “If you want to come here again or be a member, you have to do this. But if not, we can walk out and you don’t have to worry about it.”

Shouta is silent for a moment. He can feel his phone buzzing in his pants. Hizashi is probably texting him now, asking for an update. He rubs his forehead, thinking about how all the screaming and shouting isn’t exactly helping his growing migraine.

They’re waiting on this. They all want to see this. And what’s worse is that he knows Midoriya might get in trouble for this. He might get laughed at for bringing someone who backed out on the first day.

And Shouta doesn’t want to do that to him.

He huffs and starts on his way to where he saw the ring earlier. “I’m killing you when we get home,” he promises quietly, and he can almost *see* Midoriya’s hesitant smile forming underneath the mask.

“Yes, sir!”

All too soon he’s in a hexagonal boxing ring with a hundred pairs of eyes on him and Red Hair announcing the rules and what to expect. Kaida is called to the stage too, as she’s apparently the previous champion of the ring and is the referee by default.

Which, if he’s being honest, he totally expected.

Kaida finishes off telling him the rules and the limitations of the fight, and Shouta listens closely. He has to get this right and *not* fuck it up.

After all of the technicalities and precautions, he’s asked to choose the person he’d like to fight, and he doesn’t hesitate for even a moment. “Rabbit.”

The crowd laughs and cheers, and even Red Hair snorts. “Going for revenge, eh? Too bad, though. You can’t fight the person who invited you. D’you have anyone else in mind?”

Are you kidding?

But even as he thinks this, it’s not too big of a deal. He already knows who he’ll choose. It’s who he probably should have chosen anyway.

He searches the crowd for him and finds him near the back. It’s hard

to see with the spotlights on his face, but he manages.

Well, here goes nothing. I'll try to make this quick.

Leaning forward into Red Hair's microphone, Shouta speaks. "Strips?"

Izuku has never *loved* the people on the Board, but he doesn't hate them. He never has.

It's more of a love-hate sort of thing, y'know? The point on the spectrum fluctuates, but right now it's sitting way down there on the *hatred* end.

Of fucking course they happen to pop in on the one day he's doing something wrong. On the one day he's not prepared for them.

He stands before the five members, arms crossed and eyes narrowed. "I'm missing his match. Why did you call me here? Actually, why *are* you guys even here?"

"You know he's going to win, so don't act like you're missing out on something," the woman on the far left says, not unkindly.

"What I'm *missing* is seeing Strips' face get smashed in. He needs to be humbled."

A man in all blue (the one who walked up to Izuku and pulled him away from watching the glorious match that was only halfway done) nods. "That is very true. Couldn't we have postponed this, guys?"

"And people wonder why we never get things done," another man in red says in irritation. "This is important, so let's stop the arguing. The faster we're done the faster we can get going."

Board Member #4 that Izuku never bothered to learn the name of raises a hand. "I second that."

Izuku copies him. "I third that."

"You are on thin ice," Chanel Number Five interrupts, who happens to be the head of the Board. "Bringing a hero in here, Rabbit? Seriously?"

Izuku frowns. "Now hold on a minute, I thought underground heroes were permitted here? They always have been. In fact, an underground hero is who *created* this shitshow all those years ago."

"Obviously they're allowed," Blue says. "You just know you have to tell us before inviting one in. And you *didn't."*

"I lost your phone numbers. That was my bad."

"Is everything a joke to you?" Four cuts in.

Before Izuku can come up with a great response to that, Chanel Number Five interrupts them, voice thunderous. "Alright, forget it! That's not what we're here to talk about." His eyes glow white in faint warning, freezing Izuku in place. "Rabbit, don't make that mistake again. Is that clear?"

What crawled up all their asses and died this morning? They usually let me off the hook with that stuff. "Crystal."

"Good. Now onto more pressing matters." He takes a stack of papers out and spreads them out on the desk, beckoning Izuku closer. "We have a job for you."

"When do you not?"

His comment is ignored. The other four members are deadly silent now, and Izuku suddenly realizes how dreadful the air has become. *Oh boy.*

"We've been receiving complaints and information from a few reliable sources about… a situation. That's been happening under the hero society's nose." His voice is now grim. Measured. Carefully controlled. But despite this, Izuku can hear the tremble in it.

They're scared. They're all scared. What the hell kind of job is this? Izuku momentarily forgets about the match happening downstairs.

"The reason we never asked this of you before is because we weren't going to get involved at all. This is, admittedly, bigger than us. And it's something we might not want to tread on recklessly. So this isn't a call to action. This isn't us telling you to fix this problem, Rabbit."

Izuku picks up the first file and reads the dates and information.

“We simply need you to go out there and research this. See if this information is credible and if there’s anything else we could use. We’ve been asked by a popular hero to help out with this case in any way we can, and we don’t want to disappoint.”

A hero? Izuku’s fingers start to twitch again. The next two files are mentally scanned and placed in folders at the back of his brain.

“Out of all the scouts we have, you’re our quickest and, as much as I hate to say it, bravest. This is why we’re asking you if you’ll take it.” A pregnant pause. “We realized you were absent for a couple weeks and had assumed you stopped your vigilantism. I can see now, however, that you were merely *upgrading.”*

The words on the page burn Izuku’s eyes and make his throat tighten. Yakuza. Quirk. Mask. Dead. Successor.

The next paper is all photos. While blurry, they still make him sick to his stomach. The photos themselves are bloodstained too, and Izuku stops himself from asking how they acquired these. He’s never allowed to ask.

“So. I know this is a lot to ask, and I know this is abrupt. I’m sorry we have to dump this on you last minute, but your sudden leave had everyone in disarray.” He speaks slowly next. “We just need to know if you'll take it. All we need is your eyes and ears. No action. No fighting. Just that and your brain.”

Izuku listens to the cheers below. The roars and hoots of all the vigilantes and heroes and villains alike seem to shake the whole earth. He can feel the vibrations in his bones.

How is it that he came here tonight to tell his teacher—no, he’s not just his teacher anymore, he’s something more, a title that Izuku doesn’t know the name of yet—about an important part of his life, only to end up here? In front of a stupid, *stupidly* powerful group of people who are asking him to do yet another mission that he ought not let himself be involved in?

He took the last one they gave to him like this without hesitating, and he has the scars and nightmares that are now permanently a part of his life to prove why that was a bad idea. Ironically, that’s the mission that got him promoted to this level, but whatever.

“Rabbit?” The woman speaks again this time, and is it just him, or does she sound almost sad? Regretful is probably the better word.

“Yeah.” He breathes out, and that’s that.

The room turns colder. The shadows get darker. And Izuku focuses again on that last key word. This is what he has to find out. He has to find out what this means. What this *does*.

And what it will do.

Izuku hates that on a day where he’s sharing a secret with one of his teachers, he only gets one more to hold and to hide.

Well… maybe, just maybe he doesn’t have to keep this one to himself. Maybe Aizawa could help. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

That’s always his own personal keyword, isn’t it? It shows up a lot.

He blinks and sees the word from the file behind his eyes, and he can only pray he can complete this mission quickly.

Overhaul doesn’t sound like it’s such a fun word.

Chapter End Notes

> i think it would’ve been cool if mic went with izuku to the club instead of aizawa. those interactions would’ve been crazy!! might do something like that later on
>
> this song is nice
> n

the old and the new

Chapter Notes

> i actually thoroughly enjoyed making this one. have a little bit more dad content before everything goes downhill 😈
>
> (cw: implied drugging)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is sitting on the table in the dark conference room with his brows furrowed, surrounded by stacks of documents. A large portion of the words on the pages are either highlighted or circled, with little notes being written off to the side of them. They're all color-coded for his own convenience, as he likes to keep things neat when it's for work.

Red for times and dates, green for locations, blue for names, and purple for information that will be crucial for forming his future plans. If he's supposed to do what the Board is asking him to do and still make it out alive, he has to be careful. He has to be thorough.

And, as always, he has to be one step ahead.

Izuku balances a pen on his knuckles and tugs at his hair with his other hand, perplexed. It didn't take him very long to pull up all of the files he has on the Yakuza, specifically its line of bosses, and print them out using the extra printer in this room. Actually, the only difficult part now is just picking all of the information apart and deciding what will be useful to him.

Some of the names listed on the documents have already been crossed out by Izuku, either because the data given was outdated or because he determined the people were unimportant.

But even with doing that, Izuku is still left with around three dozen persons of interest to look over. Some of them are directly affiliated with the Yakuza, others are not. He figures that after his internship is over he should go and somehow secretly talk to the non-affiliated people first.

It's best to get some background information before running headfirst into things.

I wonder if Yagi knows anything. I'm sure he's run into the Yakuza before, being who he is. Maybe I can ask…

How exactly he can word a question like that without alarming Yagi or putting him in another one of those *I feel like I should snitch to Aizawa* moods, Izuku doesn't know, but he should still try.

This is an important mission. Lives are at stake. He needs to do anything and everything possible before starting.

Aizawa's first fight down below has long since ended, but the man doesn't stop there like Izuku thought he would. Instead, he ends up agreeing (only a little reluctantly) to a few more matches.

For a *warm-up,* he says.

Izuku is watching it all go down through a hologram that's set up in the middle of the conference table. It has great quality, and Izuku is happy he got his hands on it. Now, did he steal this very expensive piece of equipment from one of the board members before they left? He can neither confirm nor deny.

(They'll probably send someone over to get it back from him in a few weeks, but Izuku is a good runner!)

The camera feed shows Aizawa continuing to fight any of the members who come up to challenge him, and it's pretty entertaining, honestly. Izuku has seen most of these moves before—hell, he *uses* a lot of these moves!—but not many at the club have. Which makes watching their reactions to Aizawa's quick takedowns and brutal blows all the more hilarious.

Izuku works as efficiently as he can, glancing up every now and then to watch whatever fight is going on. He knows, despite Aizawa's guarded and outwardly blank expression, that his teacher might be enjoying this.

This is just a workout for him. It's like fighting on patrol but without the risk of any civilian getting injured.

That's why Izuku likes it so much, too.

It's obvious that Aizawa already has the respect of most of the people there. If he didn't before, he's definitely earning it right now. Izuku is only grateful that they're not counting these as ranked matches—otherwise, his title as Champion might be threatened sometime soon.

I think you could beat him, Voice #6 says seriously in Izuku's mind.

A snort, and then Voice #5 is shooting that idea down. *Don't lie to the kid. That's just pitiful.*

Izuku ignores them and looks at the files around him once more. It really is getting late, and all of the words and colors are starting to blur together on the pages, making it difficult for him to concentrate. He squeezes his eyes shut and brings his knees to his chest, palms pressing against his cheeks.

Focus, he tells himself. *C'mon, you stupid fuck. Just focus.*

This is bigger than him. Way bigger. This is probably one of his most important jobs yet. It'll probably pay better than any of his past missions, too, which is always a plus.

But even as he thinks this, Izuku feels a slight stab of guilt in his chest. He pushes that train of thought away. He doesn't… *need* money anymore. Yamada made it very clear the other day that he isn't supposed to be accepting any jobs from his old clients, as did Aizawa. He said he would feel a lot better if Izuku didn't feel like he had to resort to something like that just to live.

It's still a hard concept for Izuku to get used to. It's hard to truly realize that he doesn't *need* the extra money his jobs can provide him, now that he's living with Aizawa and Yamada. They pay for everything of his—as much as he hates it—and won't ever tolerate the idea of him putting some money into something.

And in a way, he understands. He understands why exactly they're saying this and why they're feeling this way, but it's still a little annoying.

"We have money," Aizawa reminds him for the eighteenth time sometime during the week, sounding mildly annoyed. His teeth are gritted and words tight. "Stop feeling like you have to go out and get a job right this second, kid. It'll be fine."

"It won't just be fine," *Izuku argues with a roll of his eyes. "And it's not like I don't already have the job. I was just asking if I could maybe keep doing my tasks there whenever I'm allowed to go back. It might require me to be away for a bit, or to stay up on certain nights, which is the* only *reason why I'm asking you at all."*

Izuku needs to remind the bastard that he has no say in his vigilante

activities. The boy has already let him interfere enough.

"That's great. And I said no."

"I'm going to kick you."

"It's still a no."

Izuku turns to the other adult in the room and practically whines. "Yama! C'mon, please tell him he's being unfair. It's not even a big deal."

Yamada just raises a brow at him, unamused. "I don't think he's being unfair," he says, a slight warning to his tone. "I think he's trying to keep you safe, yeah?"

By now, Izuku knows not to grumble back that he never asked for Aizawa to do that, as that would just complicate things.

"He's right," the blond continues. "You really don't need to force yourself to take on jobs just for the money. If you decide to do a few here and there just to help, that'll be alright, but not because you feel you have to." Yama's brows furrow. "You know that's our job, right? To take care of you? If you ever need money, or you want something, you only ever have to ask."

Izuku's face screws up, sour now that he knows neither one of his teachers is going to take his side. They said he can do a few, right? As long as he doesn't do it strictly for the money? Well… that'll be an easy loophole to use. He's never done anything just *for the money.*

He can call the money he'll receive tips, and they won't be able to say a word.

It's all annoying because while he may not need money right now due to their willingness to take care of him financially—something that they do not have to do whatsoever, as housing and feeding him is one thing and spending their hard-earned money on him is another—he still needs money to save up. He needs something to fall back on. A Plan Z.

He's *always* had emergency money. Every time he did a job he would take what little he could spare and put it in a safe place at his old building. He had good money saved up there, as he started saving when he first started at the Club. He was going to use it to leave this damned country, but obviously, that didn't work out.

Now that he doesn't have that money anymore, he needs to start over. He needs… he needs to save up in case shit hits the fan again and he has to leave. Besides, this is all temporary. Eventually, he won't be able to rely on his teachers' goodness. He'll need money for when his time runs out.

And Izuku knows they don't mean it like this, that they're not this malicious, but them telling him—well, Yama told him; Aizawa, on the other hand, practically *forbade* him—that he shouldn't accept jobs for the money anymore just feels like their way to cut him off.

Without money, he's forced to be dependent on them and how far they're willing to extend their kindness.

He's being stranded out at sea with no other options but to stay on the island that is UA instead of jumping on nearby ships of choice toward freedom.

And god, it makes him anxious. It makes him angry, it makes him *scared.*

But maybe, just maybe he can start his savings up again with *this* job. This'll pay well, so he can for sure use this as an opportunity.

The matter still remains, though: how is he going to tell them about this? He has to, right? This isn't something he can hide. Besides, this is dangerous. He needs them to be aware of what he's doing so that, on the off chance something happens, they'll be prepared not only to protect themselves but to finish what he started.

Because despite his issues with money, he's not doing this just for the cash or because the Board asked him to. No, he's doing it for *her.*

The small document before him is crinkled with how hard he's gripping it. Reports of a small child following the new Yakuza leader around are laid out. There's only one blurry photo of her face, but to Izuku, it's enough. She must be like five years old. Maybe just a little older.

She looks malnourished, even from the shit quality of the photo. And *fuck,* that look on her face. It's one of pure terror and guilt. She looks like one of those lost children that Izuku has had to save on patrol before—except she's not lost, as she's gripping onto the man so hard that the fabric of his jacket must be tearing. It's like she's afraid to let go.

Like she'll be hurt if she does.

Now, Izuku does sometimes jump to conclusions. Hell, that's his actual trademark as Rabbit. But most of the time, and he's not boasting here, just being truthful, most of the time his conclusions are right. Or at least on the way there.

He's learned to trust his gut in most situations because a lot of times his gut is correct.

This girl that no one seems to know the name of yet… can't possibly be in a good situation. And with the other reports Izuku managed to scrounge up about a certain *bullet* being manufactured all around Japan, Izuku *knows* she isn't.

He lets out a shuddering breath, hands moving up to grab his hair. He's not pulling, as Yagi would get on his ass about that if he did, just holding. He's holding the curly strands just tight enough to make his head stop swimming. The voices are back, and there are too many of them this time. It's getting uncomfortable. It's making his head feel like it's about to split open.

The shadows are moving around again, forming monsters that Izuku only sees in his memories, and he doesn't need to see that. He *really* doesn't need that.

He knows the voices and shadows aren't real, he does, but it's hard to convince himself sometimes.

"You gonna tell him about that?"

Well, *most* of them aren't real.

Izuku removes his hands and throws the woman a look. She closes the door behind her, two bottles of something clear in her hand. She nods at the papers spread all around him, a clear indicator of what she's referring to, and Izuku narrows his eyes.

"Aren't you supposed to be refereeing, Dragon Lady?"

"You're the only member here to keep calling me that. You know my name, so use it."

"You called me Bunny for three months straight after joining this club. I think this is warranted."

She sits in a chair with her legs hiked up on the table and takes the corks out of the bottles with her teeth. “That’s one hell of a grudge. You need a hobby.”

“Yeah, well, I think I’ve got one now.” He gestures to all of his research, a clear invitation, and he watches her diamond pupils get smaller as she gives them another look.

She lets out a breath, and the smoke goes to curl around some of the papers to bring it to her. She skims over it all, face blank, while Izuku fiddles with the laces on his boots.

“And… I have to. Tell him, that is.” His face screws up. “This isn’t some one-night job I can get away with not telling him about. This will take a while. It’ll be tiring to keep making up excuses.”

Besides, he promised.

“Yakuza, huh?” She asks, not commenting on what he said.

“That’s what they told me.”

“Are you the only one looking into this?”

“They didn’t say if I’m gonna be working alone or not, but President Shitface made it sound like I am.” *It’d be safer that way.*

“I don’t doubt it. They don’t like putting too many of their cards in one place in case things go south.”

Izuku leans back, watching the hologram. This is shitty. Why did he agree to do this again? Oh, yeah, that’s right. He has no choice, really. His mouth goes dry, and he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Does this ever get easier?” He asks, blinking when Aizawa throws yet another member out of the ring with ease.

She chugs the rest of her bottle down, throwing the papers aside. She then slides the other clear bottle to him, this one labeled *Non-Alcoholic: Somnus.* “From one champion to another?” Her voice is slightly sarcastic. “No.”

“Did they ever do this stuff to you? Throw missions like this on you?”

Dragon Lady scoffs. “All the time. Why do you think I stepped down? Handing out drinks is much easier.”

Izuku smiles. “I thought you were just too scared of me and didn’t want to accept my challenges in the ring.”

Her skin shimmers on her cheekbones, revealing iridescent scales for just a brief moment. She lifts the bottle even higher above her mouth, seemingly irritated that there’s nothing left. “You know I only need a second to put you in the ground.”

“Why is this not the first time I’ve heard that?” Really, it’s getting concerning now. Why can’t people come up with more original threats?

Izuku can’t talk, actually.

It looks like Aizawa is finishing up his last fight, as now he’s laughing good-naturedly and shaking hands with some of the members of the crowd. It’s only half genuine, Izuku thinks. Aizawa can be a social butterfly (moth?) when he needs to be.

He’s fitting in nicely, better than Izuku suspected. *Maybe this is good. This can help both of us. Maybe Aizawa can get information from here too.*

The wind whistles outside, and rain hits the darkened windows. Its cadence is like a heartbeat. Izuku counts the tempo, and it’s in time with his own.

“You know, when Akaguro still walked around here, he would tell me stories about you.”

Izuku’s eyes slide over to her. She’s still studying the inside of the glass bottle, lips turned up in displeasure. The rain pounds harder.

“Every time he talked it would be with this kind of *intensity,* ya know? It was almost obsessive.” She flourishes her hand. “He’s a stupid, sick old bastard, and one of these days his mistakes will bite him in the ass, but… I think there was something else there. Another goal.”

Lightning strikes and the bottle is being set down on the table. Izuku reaches for his own.

“You gave him a spark. And honestly? I’d say he almost changed.”

Deathly quiet, Izuku downs the honey-like liquid in a similar fashion to how Dragon Lady did. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to be saying here. Maybe nothing at all. Maybe she already knows what

he'd say and he shouldn't bother. Either way, Izuku doesn't want to hear this. Call him a coward, but Akaguro Chizome is a piece of him he'd rather discard permanently.

He'd give him the *All for One Special* if he could.

No matter how hard Izuku tried, he could never change his master's—no, *Stain's* ways. He couldn't. Stain stopped his killings during the year or so that he taught Izuku, but only when the boy broke down and begged him to. That moment of weakness, that flaw of Izuku's, as Stain called it, made him need three weeks of recovery, but it was worth it.

Preventing the death of the innocent will always be worth it.

But after Stain figured his subject was fine on his own, he left. He went back to what his original plan was as if Izuku was nothing more than a roadblock to him, a filler chapter, but this time he started going for more heroes than ever before, and he couldn't be stopped.

Not even the whole of the Club could do anything against their rogue member. Not individually, at least—and good luck trying to corner him for a group fight.

Dragon Lady spins the bottle on its side and keeps it going with another wisp of smoke. "He only ever looked alive when he was teaching you. Your quick improvement solidified his idea of a better, *purer* future. He was always proud, in his own fucked way, even if he never said it."

Izuku doesn't think that's the best thing, but he keeps quiet, throat tight as the end of the bottle comes to a slow stop and points at an empty space beside him.

"And I see that look on someone else's face, too."

Izuku glances at her, but she's not looking at him; she's staring at the screen. Aizawa is searching the crowds with a dark expression, but Izuku has known him long enough now to see the worry that he's trying to hide on his face. But beyond that… yeah, there's something else there. He can see it if he tries hard enough.

It's something that Izuku has started seeing on all of the teachers' faces back at UA.

Tsukauchi has always looked like this.

Izuku wonders, traitorously, if Inko ever shared this look, too, but beats that thought away, eyebrows scrunched together now.

Dragon Lady snatches his bottle and gets up. “Consider telling Mr. Hero more about yourself. He seems nice enough. Looks like he needs to drink more, though.” Glowing eyes focus on him from the direction of the door. “But he must be doing something right. You’ve never looked so healthy. ‘Sides, you don’t stink anymore.”

This shocks Izuku out of his stupor. “Hey!”

But she’s gone just as quick as the storm came, with only the smell of her smoke being left behind. He’s alone in the dark once more, the hologram’s blue light now disappearing.

Izuku hesitates before lowering his head to his own armpit, and all he can smell is cherries and fresh linen. He’s left to wonder if he really *did* smell that bad on patrol before coming into the care of his teachers.

And if he did, well, he’s going to kill Kacchan for never telling him.

“So,” Shouta begins, trying not to sound too concerned or upset. “Where did you go? I looked for you after the first fight and didn’t see you.”

“I had to do something really quick, but I still saw the tail end of it. You did great!”

Great. That’s not even an answer. Midoriya must be getting into one of *those* moods. Instead of arguing or pushing for a better response, Shouta just accepts the words and gestures to the small drawstring bag on Midoriya’s back. He knows the kid didn’t leave the apartment with it.

“What’s that?”

“A bag,” Midoriya says.

“I see that. What’s in it?”

“Papers! There’s a lot of documents, that’s it. Nothing too important.” He seems to catch himself. “Well, maybe a little important. *A lot* important. I think… I think maybe you should look at them with me in… a couple of weeks or so. Might be, uh, helpful.”

That’s a better answer.

Shouta nods in approval, his hands moving into his pockets. He’s sore from all that fighting, and the chilly air outside isn’t making anything better. It’s only sprinkling now, but the droplets cut into his skin like frostbite waiting to happen.

“You must trust that place a lot,” Shouta says, continuing on smoothly. Far behind them, the lights of the Law Firm blink. “Thank you for showing me it, kid.”

“Oh, yeah! It’s… it’s like my second home. I told you it’s important to me.” Midoriya stares hard at the ground, and Shouta just knows he’s chewing on his lip beneath that mask.

“That’s a dangerous place to consider home,” he says cautiously, keeping his voice level.

“I know. But they made sure I was safe when I didn’t know what to do by myself.” He pauses, thinking. “He made sure I had a place to go to stay alive.”

“He?”

“The one who invited me.” Yawning, Midoriya rubs at his eyes. He looks more tired than Shouta feels. The boy leans against Shouta suddenly, the contact taking the man by surprise. Shouta tugs him closer and keeps an eye on the people who are watching them from neighboring rooftops.

They’ve been watching them for a while, ever since they left the Club.

“Don’t worry about them,” Midoriya says with another yawn, not even opening his eyes as he uses him as a walking stick. “They added more security to the Club since Stain is becoming more active in this area, so that’s why there are people on all corners watching the exits after a certain time. They wanted to make sure he wouldn’t try to waltz in.”

He blinks. “Stain? Why would he?”

Midoriya is getting heavier all of a sudden. Shouta shifts and moves

him so he's not so close to the edge of the strip mall they're walking on. He wouldn't want him to fall.

"Because he used to be a member? Duh, why else?" Midoriya gives a little annoyed huff. "I already told you that."

Shouta does a full-body flinch and looks down at Midoriya quickly. The kid is practically asleep on his feet now. He wonders what happened during the time the kid was MIA for him to be this tired.

"Ya know, he was pretty mean. But he was a wicked cool teacher." A drowsy sniff. "Might kill him the next time I see him, though."

The words are slurred, and it's hard for Shouta to hear them, but once he processes what was said, he stops dead in his tracks. Without any support now, Midoriya stumbles, about to fall flat on his face, but Shouta's hand shoots out and grabs the back of his hoodie before he can reach the floor.

And just like that, with the both of them standing above the earth, the air biting at their skin, the puzzle pieces seem to fall into place. It's not fast. It's slow. Like feathers descending to the ground.

Teacher. What does he mean by that? And why did he say he already told Shouta before?

Shit. This is just as Tsukauchi suspected, isn't it?

Shouta pulls Midoriya up, baffled now. *You might kill him?* He's about to ask what the fuck the kid is talking about, but once he gets a good look on Midoriya's face, he hesitates. He looks drunk, and Shouta is suddenly tempted to ask if that really *was* Sprite in that shot glass. "Hey," he says instead, shaking him. "Kid."

When he receives no coherent response, Shouta just curses to himself and hauls Midoriya up to rest over his shoulder. The boy almost drops his drawstring bag but manages to catch it at the last moment, giggling creepily to himself.

"Thanks," he says, or tries to.

"We're talking more about this later," Shouta promises, having to physically stop himself from trying to get the answers out of Midoriya right now. The vigilante may as well be high, so asking him anything in this state isn't a good idea.

Tomorrow the students leave for the internships. I'll have to ask him about all this after he comes back. Dammit.

Or… Or he could just not let Midoriya go to the internships after all, now that he has reason to believe the kid could be in even more danger. If he does that, though, he'd have to face the wrath of Nezu.

Shouta shakes his head and continues on, faster now. He won't do that to the kid now, not after already telling him he could go and be like a normal student, but best believe that he will get his answers. Shouta has failed to be strict on those kinds of things before, and he won't do that now. He'll just have to wait a little longer.

After over a year of knowing Rabbit and trying to fish out all his secrets, he figures it wouldn't kill him to wait another week.

Midoriya is fully out of it by the time they arrive back at the apartment, and Shouta's back is crying.

Hizashi blinks upon opening the door. "Is he…?"

"He's asleep."

"He fell asleep on a patrol?" His husband asks, disbelief coloring his voice. "Usually he's so excited!"

Shouta kicks off his shoes and treks down the hallway with Missy and Hizashi following behind him. "He hasn't been sleeping the last couple of days." He moves Midoriya again so he's being carried bridal style and opens the door. "I'll have to ask Chiyo if there's anything we can start giving him for that."

Hizashi quickly pulls back the dark green covers of Midoriya's bed, and Shouta grunts as he sets the kid down. He's been getting heavier. That's a good thing, really, but not for Shouta's back.

I'm gonna be built like a candy cane after all this.

He struggles to take Midoriya's boots off, mentally wondering why the hell his student decided that knee-high, tightly laced boots were a good idea for fighting crime. If you need to take them off quickly for an emergency or something, you'll have quite a bit of trouble. He'd be dead before he could even get the first knot loose.

Shouta tosses them aside and comes to the conclusion that the kid will just have to deal with sleeping in his new Rabbit costume. It needs a

wash anyway after their patrol, so it's not like it'll matter.

He pulls up the comforter and folds the frankly *disgusting* All Might blanket that Nemuri gifted Midoriya, wondering if anyone would notice if it somehow ended up missing later on. Missy takes claim to the blanket before he can accidentally dispose of it, though, which foils his plans.

Shouta spots the phone peeking out of the kid's jacket pocket and fishes it out, putting it on charge on the nightstand next to him. He knows how annoying it can be to wake up to a dead phone.

Sweeping the curls out of Midoriya's face so he won't sweat during the night, Shouta fights back a yawn of his own. His work now done, he stands up straight and stretches, groaning when he hears a pop. He rubs a hand down his face and turns to the open door where Hizashi is waiting. The blond is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

Shouta's eyes narrow at the shit-eating grin on his husband's face. "What?"

"Absolutely nothing, babe." Hizashi kisses him deeply after the door is shut, surprising Shouta, and leads him to the living room. "I heated up some leftovers if you're still hungry. I know you both were out pretty late."

They sit on the couch, just basking in the silence around them for a moment. Shouta eats like he hasn't touched food in months, which is normal, honestly. He always acts like this after a particularly hard night of patrolling.

Hizashi's cooking tastes even better when Shouta's just returned from kicking ass.

"So how was it? You guys don't look beat up at all." Hizashi has his legs resting over Shouta's thighs. He always takes up the most space on the couch.

Quickly, Shouta explains what happened. He mentions some of their fights first and then moves onto the club, giving the most important details that he can remember. He tells Hizashi what he thinks of it so far and asks about his husband's own opinions on it, and after that, he reveals what he just learned from Midoriya.

Hizashi's expression is clouded. "Stain, huh?" He shakes his head. "We should've known."

Shouta huffs, turning on the TV once he sets his chopsticks down. “Well, we *would* know shit like this if the kid decided to actually tell us these things once in a while. Out of everything, you think Stain would be the one thing he’d mention; he’s a *serial killer,* for God’s sake. He should tell us that he was in an organization with him and *knows* him.”

“He must’ve been too ashamed to talk about it. Wouldn’t you be, too? Especially after hearing about what happened to Tensei—his friend’s brother?” Despite the words, Hizashi does look a little frustrated. There’s too much happening behind his eyes, and there’s a shadow passing over his face that has nothing to do with the lamp near him. It’s obvious the news Shouta gave is taking a toll on him. “Well, besides that. I’m glad he’s sharing stuff now. Even if it’s technically the bare minimum. Like I said before: we’re getting there.”

Yeah. Getting there. But will we get to the end quick enough to prevent his ass from getting killed?

“Has Tsukauchi contacted you back?” Hizashi asks, changing the subject. He gets to his feet and walks into the kitchen, getting out two bowls.

“Yeah. He’s coming over sometime next week to talk about what he’s found.”

“That’s during the internship,” Hizashi says sourly. “I don’t like that. Midoriya should be here when we discuss all of this.”

Shouta accepts the bowl of ice cream without preamble when offered it, his next words dark. “Depending on what Tsukauchi found, it has to be like that.”

“We can’t keep any more secrets from the kid, Sho.”

“It won’t be a secret for long. We’ll be having another conversation with all of us present, including Yagi and the others after Midoriya comes back from the internship. We have to straighten some things out first, ‘Zashi. And not just the legalities of it all.”

God knows how many hoops Nezu had to jump through to get Midoriya to even stay here. Shouta can complain and moan about the Principal’s methods as much as he wants, but he does have to admit that Nezu deserves all the respect. Without him, there’s no telling what would be happening now.

Things are going down a rocky, steep slope. But if they're careful (Shouta fucking hopes they are), they shouldn't trip.

Midoriya will have his internship as he wanted and things will eventually get better. That's all Shouta is hoping for at the moment.

"How're things with Shinsou?"

Shouta stares down into the scoops of his Rocky Road, the tension in his shoulders leaving him. "Better than I expected, actually. He's always on time and works just as hard as my students, if not harder. He learns just like I do." He remembers their last training session with fondness. "I show him how to do a certain thing and the best ways to use it in a fight, and he takes off. He's an incredibly fast learner. He's eager, but a little unsure of himself."

"Well, then you're the best teacher to help him with that."

Shouta takes another bite of his dessert, letting out a breath through his nose. He guesses he is. This whole mentoring thing is a learning process for Shouta, too, as he's been trying to figure out how to teach someone who's just like himself. He's taught many people before, of course, but none have been quite like Shinsou.

It's only been a week or so since he started giving him lessons in the mornings and sometimes afternoons, but Shouta can already tell that Shinsou is somewhat different.

But it's no matter. That's what Shouta is here for. He's going to make sure his students are the best the world has ever seen.

Because the best are the only ones who survive.

Just like his obsession with tall buildings, Izuku has a thing for trains.

He likes them. They're pretty neat. Izuku still remembers that one time a year and a half ago where he had a dream about becoming a train and exploring the world.

What was he again? A bullet train? Yeah, that's it. Izuku was the

fastest in the country even as a goddamn train, and he lives by that.

Now, did he have this dream after passing out trying to get the fragments of that one bullet out of his flesh? Yes. Does that change the fact that Izuku actually likes trains? No.

He likes to ride on top of them, usually. Not in them. This is mostly because of the whole *I like rooftops and things that go whoosh!* shtick he has, but also because Izuku just couldn't afford to pay the fares all the time.

Besides, the view you can get of distant horizons while on a speeding train? It's like no other.

Sitting in a train like a normal person is dangerous, in Izuku's own correct opinion. Thievery is high in trains, and the chances of sitting next to an escaped criminal unknowingly is actually around 15 percent—Izuku gathered that data himself. He's met many… interesting people on trains before. All mostly by accident.

The keyword there is mostly.

It's also dangerous because the train can turn into a man-eating monster at any second, and Izuku wouldn't have any time to stop himself from being consumed. The train could also crash!

Either way, he just doesn't like being inside trains. He's perfectly happy sitting on the top when he can get the chance (right up until a tunnel comes out of nowhere).

So, having to take one (legally, to his misfortune) all the way to his internship destination is kind of annoying, if he's to be honest.

He's standing up, having given his seat to an older man a few minutes ago, and on high alert. Things are quiet, but that's how it starts. He has to be ready for anything, which is why he brought his Rabbit costume just in case despite Aizawa's wishes.

Of course, he was given more rules pertaining to the internship before leaving the apartment with Aizawa, which made him want to start levitating yet again.

"I thought this was a democracy," Izuku says with his face screwed up. "You can't just add more rules to the list because you feel like it. I've gotta agree to them first."

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“Yamada said so.”

Aizawa turns to him, voice low and almost threatening. “That’s because Hizashi is—”

“I’m what?” Yamada asks, appearing out of thin air behind his husband.

“—completely right. Forget whatever I said, brat.”

It’s not like anything good came out of Izuku’s defiance, as Yamada ended up getting Izuku to agree to the new rules anyway before finally sending him off, telling him to call one of them at least once a day. The rules were all safety-related and with his best interest in mind, so it’s not like Izuku can complain too much.

When they arrived at the station with the rest of the students, Aizawa gave everyone his number just in case a less than pleasant situation arises during their week away. He reminded everyone to be respectful and to not embarrass UA, and then promptly shooed them away.

Izuku, after saying goodbye to Kacchan and dodging his explosion, made sure to catch up to Iida before he could leave. Uraraka was right beside him as he spoke, suddenly a little awkward.

“Try to be safe, Iida!” Izuku begins, plastering a reassuring smile on his face. There’s a sinking feeling in his gut, and he doesn’t like it. “And I know you said not to mention it, but if you ever need to talk about anything… I’m always here. We’re friends!” Right? “We’ll always have your back, so… don’t hesitate to talk to us.”

Uraraka nods vehemently, repeating what Izuku said, and Iida turns around with a small smile of his own.

“Sure.”

Before Izuku could say anything else, Iida went on his way, and soon after that Uraraka had to catch her train too. Aizawa walked up to him from behind and told him to keep an eye out during his internship, giving him last-minute advice.

“Move quickly when you’re out in the open in the city. If anything’s amiss, you need to—”

“Call you or Yama, yes, yes, I know. I’m going now.”

"Or *press the panic button. That's what it's there for.*"

"Hopefully it doesn't mysteriously disappear then, huh?"

Aizawa made a swipe for his hair then, but Izuku was already dodging and jumping into the train right before the doors closed. He made sure to wave a smug goodbye as Aizawa faded away from view.

Right now, he's alone, even if it doesn't look like it. The ride to the internship isn't long, but Izuku is still starting to get impatient. How long until he gets there? A few minutes? He's been buzzing ever since this morning, and plus, he woke up with a horrible headache. To get in a better mood, he needs to start moving around.

"Hey, isn't that the kid from the Sports Festival?"

Or Izuku can just worsen his headache.

"Oh my God, you're right!"

Multiple people turn to look at Izuku, shuffling closer to talk to him. "You were great out there, son! That last fight was spectacular!"

"Yeah! I was on the edge of my seat the whole time! It was brutal."

One of them, an older woman, shakes her head. "I swear these hero kids get stronger and stronger each year."

Izuku laughs nervously, cheeks burning. His grip on his suitcase tightens. What is he supposed to say here?

"You almost nabbed first place, kid. Just keep trying and I'm sure you'll get it next time!"

The first speaker nods in agreement, eyes bright. "His fight with Endeavor's boy sure was something. I don't think I've ever been that invested in the outcome of a match before!"

The commotion attracts more people, and soon, Izuku is practically surrounded. He hunches over, wincing at the feeling of so many quirks swarming around him.

"Hey, mind if we ask some questions about All Might!"

Just then, the train starts to come to a halt, and Izuku nearly *flies* out the doors when they slide open, calling back a quick apology. Thank fuck this is his stop.

He only barely stops himself from taking to the rooftops. It's instinctual, so it's hard to just *not.* Doing that would be illegal.

The city isn't so busy at this time, so his walk is mostly uneventful. Now, though, his nerves are starting to go haywire. He's going to meet *Gran Torino.*

Yagi's teacher. His *sensei.* Someone who has fought Izuku's father more than once and knew Shimura Nana personally.

I can learn a lot from him, but I'm just scared as to what he'll say when he sees me. All Might is terrified of him, so that means I'm in for a world of hurt too.

As if on cue, Izuku hears a ding on his phone. It's a text from Yagi: ***I hope you have fun, my boy! Please be safe!***

Thanks! I'll say hello to Gran Torino for you!

The reply is immediate: ***no, pls do not.***

The fear is almost palpable even through text. Izuku cackles and plays Subway Surfers for the next few minutes, wishing mournfully he could have acted it out for real on top of the bullet train. Stupid damn laws and people's new expectations for him. It's ruining all the fun.

As he gets close, Izuku has to remind himself to take deep breaths. His legs feel heavy, and a small part of him wants to just turn around and go back to Musutafu, but he presses on. He can't be a coward here. Gran Torino is a hero! Nothing bad is going to happen.

He'll be perfectly safe.

Izuku closes his eyes and listens to his surroundings for a moment. He can't go in there on the verge of breaking down, that's for sure. What a first impression that would be, huh? What if Izuku just flat out threw up at Gran Torino's feet?

Then he really would have to move out of the country. He'd have to change his whole damn identity to escape that embarrassment!

In all honesty, Izuku is surprised when he sees the building he's going to be staying at. It's a sight for sore eyes, that's for sure. And coming from him? That's saying something.

The building is surrounded by a ten foot high wall, its metal polished

and shiny. That seems to be the only thing that's new, however.

Construction signs and gates are littered all around it, but from how dirty they look he can tell they've just been abandoned. It's like they were never taken away after the construction of the building was actually completed.

Well, that's assuming the building was completed at all. It looks like it's unfinished, like it didn't even get to the final stages. Did the person making this place just run out of budget midway through? There are only a few floors! For a whole ass 'agency,' that's not very many!

Vines are growing and sprouting out through the various large cracks in the walls, and there are huge indents in the bricks as if multiple large villains slammed into them once before. The windows that are only present on the upper floors have all been blown out, and little trees are growing out of them to reach the sunlight.

Is this an agency or a jungle?

Izuku puts his hands on his hips. This building is in a worse condition than his own used to be.

And Izuku loves it. It's growing on him already. *Huh. Maybe I can bargain with him to own one of the upper floors. I need more safe houses. I can rebuild all of my shit!*

There's one person in the building. Just one. Izuku can feel their quirk. It's strong and chaotic, like a live wire. *Extract* gives a little jerk inside Izuku, making him frown to himself.

He knocks on the door, but it's already cracked open. Peeking his head inside, he pushes it open more and looks around.

"Hey, I'm Midoriya Izuku! I'm from UA!" He takes another step in, muscles tense. "I'm here for the internship, sir!"

The door snaps shut behind him, making everything pitch black, and Izuku squeaks. What the hell is this? A horror movie? The quirk he's feeling a ways ahead of him hasn't moved, so what closed the door?

"Hello?" The hero should be right in front of him, but Izuku can't see him. Even with his exceptional sight, he's got nothing. Is *Extract* screwing up? "Is everything alr—?"

Izuku steps in something wet. He hears the sickening *squish* as his brand new shoes, courtesy of Principal Nezu, press against whatever is on the floor, and his soul immediately vanishes into thin air.

Well. Izuku can die here. He'd accept it.

Just as he's about to get on his knees and vow to accept whatever curse this spirit is about to give him for entering this dark domain, there's movement below him. Izuku's heart jerks, and in the blink of an eye he's throwing three of his special marble bombs toward the front entrance. They explode in a flash of white, and one of them must have hit its mark, as the lights flicker on just a moment later.

And then Izuku is greeted with a crime.

Well, it sure looks like a crime at first sight. As he suspected, what he stepped in was a thick, blood-looking substance that he's fairly certain is ketchup given by the smell and thickness. Sausages spill out in a line from the stomach of one very small, very angry old man, resembling intenstines.

A cane is discarded off to the side, and, since Izuku is certain the man can't see him yet, he uses *Pull* to grab it and poke the man. He's wearing a yellow jumpsuit with a small white cape.

The only crime that was committed here were those sausages. They're fucking burnt.

"Gran Torino, sir?" Izuku blinks, one hand holding out the cane and the other still deep in his jacket pocket, still gripping the rest of his newest inventions. This could be a clone or something. He can't know for sure. "Did you fall?"

"I'm alive!" Saying this, the man rises up like he's been resurrected, eyes wide and all seeing.

"Uh. You have ketchup on your cape."

Gran Torino(?) uses his cane to get to his feet—when the hell did he snatch that back from Izuku?—and it's only then that the boy realizes just how small he is.

Voice #7 in his mind shrieks and starts to laugh: *He's shrunk even more! Oh my gosh!*

Like Recovery Girl, Izuku supplies. *I wonder if they're the same age.*

“To slip and fall while carrying my lunch,” Gran Torino starts. “How clumsy of me!” He hunches over and begins to walk to the left where the couch is. “Who are you, boy!”

The tone has Izuku straightening up, legs coming together as he stands at attention. “Midoriya Izuku, sir! I’m, uh, your intern!”

“What?”

Izuku raises his voice. “Your intern, sir! I was told you drafted me, sir!” Did he accidentally walk into boot camp or something?

“I don’t take interns.” Gran Torino plucks a sausage off the ground before plopping down on the ratty old couch. “I want my lunch.”

Izuku cringes, seeing how the ketchup on the hero’s suit smears on the fabric of the seat. That looks like it’ll be hell to clean. Is he always like this? No. There’s no way.

Gran Torino is in costume, and the suit seems like it was pretty clean before the whole ketchup disaster thing, so he must have only just now put it on. Today. Which means he had to have known Izuku was coming—he’s not stupid. And he’s definitely not someone who can forget things to that extent.

Yagi would have mentioned it if his teacher was off his rockers, right? Izuku knows Yagi hasn’t been in steady contact with Gran Torino since he was younger, but even still. The board wouldn’t have let the smaller hero come out of retirement and back into heroism if he were like this.

Either Gran Torino really is this flighty, or he’s just fond of fucking with people. Izuku is certain it’s the last one.

None of the ketchup was dried. He must’ve estimated what time I would arrive and purposefully set up that scene to wait for me. Or maybe he was watching me in the city.

Izuku would like to say he would’ve felt it if that was the case, but honestly at this point he can’t gauge Gran Torino’s skill to any extent, so he can’t.

“Torino, sir, can I ask what—”

“Toshinori!”

Izuku chokes, his question immediately forgotten as he waves his hands. “Ah! I’m a little too short to be—”

He blinks, and suddenly Gran Torino is behind him, looking through his suitcase. How he got the four locks off in 0.04 seconds is beyond Izuku, but he doesn’t have time to worry about it because—

“H-Hey! Don’t touch that!” Izuku breaks out of his respectful stance, icy claws gripping his heart, and reaches for the suitcase. For once, though, he’s not even close to being fast enough.

Gran Torino pulls out his Rabbit costume from the secret compartment Izuku himself installed into the carrier, and he holds it up by one of the bunny ears.

Oh wow.

Izuku has been here for not even twenty seconds and has already fucked himself over. That has to be a new record, right?

Gran doesn’t pay much attention to it at all before tossing it into the pile of ketchup and sausages. “You’re stupid for bringing that here! You won’t be needing it.”

Wait. He already *knows?* Who the hell told him?

Izuku’s panic returns, bringing with it irritation. He slips trying to pick his costume out from the gunk. “I just spent three hours this morning cleaning that! You can’t just throw it in ketchup, sir!”

That’s the wrong thing to say to someone you just met, evidently. There’s a rush of air behind him, but Izuku is ready for it this time. He leaps off the ground with red lightning licking at his skin, and he twists midair to kick the couch that’s being hurled at him away.

It crashes into the space Gran Torino was in just moments prior, flipping over onto its side.

The man picks up his hero costume next, unperturbed, and examines it with a critical eye. “This one is much nicer. Put ‘er on and come at me! Show me how you handle your One for All!”

My One for All?

“Well, I can only use around fifteen percent without injury if I try. I’ve been working on making that higher, though. It’s, uh… a long process.

And All Might can't really help me with any of that, so…"

When Izuku trails off, Gran Torino turns to him with a quizzical look. "Who are you again?"

Dear God.

Izuku folds his Rabbit costume and sets it on the counter closest to him. "I'm trying to find a way for One for All to strengthen my hands while minimizing the damage. I can't afford to break them anymore, so I need an alternative. If I don't find one, I'll just be limiting myself to using it in my legs, and I'll be as good as dead."

His feet are suddenly swept out from under him, and Izuku lands on his ass with a yelp. Gran Torino jabs him in the chest with his cane, shoving the hero costume into Izuku's hands. "The problem isn't a lack of strength, it's your damn stupidity. The sooner you get that through your head, boy, the faster you'll grow. Now come at me!"

Izuku, not having expected the serious response, just gapes at him for a moment before standing up. Doesn't this have everything to do with strength? He doesn't understand what he's saying.

"I need to perfect One for All as quickly as possible, that's all." Izuku looks away, staring at where four large, moldy boards have been nailed up over where a window probably once was. "All Might doesn't have a lot of time left, so I need to catch up. I… I came here because I heard what you were like back then. And I thought that maybe you could help me w—"

A boot to the face is what Izuku receives in reply. He's thrown against the wall, breath leaving him in one *whoosh,* and the world sways around him. Black spots dance in the corner of his vision, and for a second he thinks he can almost see a different kind of light.

What the hell? He was so fast I couldn't even feel him rushing me!

Gran Torino is high above him on the opposite wall when he comes back to his senses. He's balancing there with his hands digging into the concrete to keep him upright, his white cape bunching around his neck and shoulders in a way that reminds Izuku of Aizawa.

"You must not've heard me. I'll tell you once more then." A wry grin stretches the edges of his lips. "I said *come at me,* you neophyte. The way you used that quirk of yours at the Sports Festival was almost laughable." He chuckles darkly, like what he's saying is some inside

joke. “All Might is a justice-obsessed fool with a need for flashy moves, and I see he’s passed that trait down to you.”

“What? My moves aren’t flashy!” Izuku clenches his hands into fists, slightly disgruntled. “And All Might’s not a fool.”

If anything, my flashiness comes from my dad’s side. Not All Might. I wonder if that’s actually what you say you’re seeing, sir.

“Fool or not, he’s a novice when it comes to teaching. He can’t watch over you properly, so that means I gotta do it.” His head tilts. “Anyway, shall we begin?”

The *forgetful old man* persona is now completely gone. Izuku finds this out the moment Gran Torino starts to toy with him. He’s sent sprawling into the middle of the room after he’s kicked in the back, and he lands on his hands and feet. *Shit.*

The hero bounces off two walls, leaving boot-shaped craters behind him, and launches another attack at Izuku from above. The boy sits up and only has just enough time to bring his arms up to protect himself before he’s being thrown back again. Izuku is still on the ground when Gran Torino comes for him once more, this time stronger than before. Izuku collides with the fridge, making him hiss.

So fast. His quirk is amazing. He’s probably the fastest hero out there besides the ones in the top ten. Just by the way he speaks and carries himself, Izuku can easily tell that this is indeed the same person who trained All Might.

They both strike hard and fast, but the difference is All Might has more strength by far. He doesn’t have to always rely on his speed to get the job done, whereas someone like Gran Torino does.

Torino relies primarily on being faster than his opponent. If he can confuse them for long enough to get even a few good hits in, the battle has already been won.

Which means Izuku can’t keep letting himself get hit. He's not All Might; he doesn’t have that kind of durability. He has to find a way to stop Torino’s movements, or to even redirect them elsewhere.

Since Izuku isn’t quite fast enough to be able to counter Torino’s blows with one of his own, he’ll have to go with something more long ranged. The only issue is that it’s harder to control his attacks with One for All when it’s not close combat. If he messes up, he may

accidentally bring the whole building down like how he absolutely *demolished* that Endeavor billboard that one night.

He doesn't know I won't bother trying to physically hit him, that's why he's been doing mainly behind attacks. He's hit me in the back four times now, but there's no set time between each blow. He's going at random to look for an opening… or, what he thinks is an opening, maybe.

"You sure do talk to yourself a lot. I'm getting impatient!" Gran Torino flies back and forth between all of the walls, going so fast that Izuku can barely track the trajectory. "Fire off an attack already! Geez. I didn't think even All Might would choose this little wet blanket as the ninth successor."

Izuku whips around at the first hint of Torino changing directions, liquid fire running through his blood at the words. His fist is already pulled back, and he lets out a small blast of air to get Torino off track. Except the man doesn't falter, he just switches tactics and instead goes for Izuku from the side.

The boy tries to jump up and aim a kick his way to avoid it, but Torino merely knocks away his outstretched leg and uses Izuku's own momentum to throw them both to the ground.

Gran Torino presses Izuku into the floor, one hand on his face and the other on his chest. It all happened so quickly that Izuku couldn't even think to call upon One for All or any of his other quirks for help.

"Your awareness isn't bad, but your hesitation to unleash your more powerful moves is what keeps making you end up like this." He huffs. "You could move faster if you'd stop trying to analyze everything you see. Some things, boy, you just have to *do.* You don't get time to spare in a battle just to think."

I know that.

Torino steps off of him after a moment. "You're resourceful, and from what I've seen you've got a good battle instinct. You're just downright foolish. Your lack of confidence in your abilities is what's shackling you, boy."

Izuku balks. "I *am* confident! I know what I can and cannot do!"

"You constantly hesitate to use One for All in the situations that require it the most. Your basic strength enhancement quirk may have served you well so far, but soon you'll need to start using One for All

as if it was yours to begin with. As of now, you've failed in doing even that, even during your little *vigilantism acts."*

"That's not true," Izuku says, but his voice is quieter now. He's trying to think of an example to use against him and can't come up with a valid one.

"During the paintball battle at the festival, you didn't use it until the very last second. You limited yourself."

"That's different. I…I couldn't! I was—"

"Injured? That's a stupid excuse. When you're injured, One for All is supposed to serve as your crutch. If you try, you should be able to achieve the maximum output of One for All with only the minimal input. *That* is what it's for."

Izuku shakes his head. "But I've tried that! It hasn't worked for me." Why does he think he's here? Why does he think he's still struggling with gaining full control and comfortability with it?

"Oh, yeah? How 'bout you go out there and actually try your best the next time you have to use it? Push away all those fears you've probably got and you'll be surprised at what comes out. One for All is not unique, so don't burden yourself with thinking you have to use it only one certain way."

Izuku's jaw snaps shut. He has to remember where he is. He can't be upset here. *I'm not scared of One for All. I'm not scared to use it. I'm just… worried, I guess.*

He *wants* to get stronger. That's a fact. But what if something happens? What if he changes something?

Gran Torino must take his silence as acceptance, as he puts his hands on his hips. "Hurt your feelings, huh? Good. There are no feelings here. Get used to that!"

Izuku rolls his eyes. "Being an old crab is still considered having feelings, you kno— *ow* !"

Pretty soon, Izuku is in his hero costume and is being guided directly by the small hero. With Torino's psychoanalysis presented, Izuku thinks he's a little more in the game now than before.

Everything that occurred before was just a warmup.

“Start with controlling your breathing first. The key to becoming more familiar with One for All is to not feel a difference between when you’re using it and when you’re not. Your resting state to your quirk activation should be near seamless to outsiders.” Gran Torino bumps his chest. “Right before you unleash a powered blow, you tend to hold your breath. That’s just asking to get the wind knocked outta ya. If you want to get even faster, you have to work on that. There should be no thoughts before you do it, and there should be no misgivings.”

Right. Izuku just needs to… pretend One for All isn’t even there. He needs to act like it’s just another part of himself. That should, theoretically, be easy. He’s had it for how long now? Over a month?

Izuku works on steadying his breathing during the continuation of their fight, even when he keeps getting knocked to the floor. Torino fights with no mercy despite not even going at full power. He doesn’t give Izuku a chance to rest or breathe, and Izuku likes that.

This type of training has always been the most effective for him, but due to All Might’s declining health, he hasn’t been able to receive it often.

Sometime during the middle of it, after Izuku has moved on to the whole *minimal thinking, more doing* thing, he’s thrown against a wall yet again. This is the sixty-eighth time in just ten minutes. Obviously he’s doing something wrong.

He slides down the wall, now upside down with his back pressed against it, and focuses on quickly regaining his lost breath. Time isn’t on Izuku’s side, so he has to act quickly.

He swears he only *blinks* and it happens.

Torino is suddenly crouching in front of him, expression blank. He grabs Izuku’s wrist and holds it up so he can examine it, and Izuku is too dumbstruck to even do anything. “Sir? What are you doing?”

He’s staring straight at Izuku’s ungloved palm, focused. There’s not even a change in his carefully guarded demeanor. He drops that hand and looks at Izuku’s other one, doing the exact same thing.

The boy doesn’t know what he’s doing until *Extract* twitches in his mind, as if warning him, and Izuku yanks his hand back, flipping himself over into a sitting position and scuttling back as far away from the suddenly very *terrifying* hero before him as possible.

Fuck.

He gulps, his breath suspended. Gran Torino's eyes drag up to meet Izuku's, and he really doesn't like that calculating look he sees there.

Izuku rubs at the center of his palms absentmindedly, calming the itch there.

"Where'd you get those?" Torino's voice is measured and gruff, just like usual, but there's *something* there. Izuku can sense it. He can feel it just in the way the air between them has gotten colder.

"Get what?" He asks immediately, words jumbled together. He holds his gaze with wide, innocent eyes, hoping it'll be enough to distract him. Or to at least fool him for now.

But he knows, deep down, that it won't work. He would never think so.

"That stupid man has always been observant." All for One rests his large hand on top of Izuku's mop of green curls. "He's fast, so you have to be faster. But if you can't be that, just be smarter."

Izuku tips his head, frowning. "How do I get smarter?"

"My boy, you just have to get into his mind and figure out what he knows. Gran Torino never forgets anything, so don't let him fool you with his acts. He has the ability to see things no one else can, to draw patterns between the most uncommon things. This is why you must be extra careful. You must be just as smart, if not better." Two fingers poke into his forehead. "That's how people like us have survived for this long. We know how to become *them in order to defeat them."*

Izuku shakes out of the unpleasant vision, not even recognizing that it was a memory at all at first. That was a long time ago. Izuku couldn't have been more than seven years old.

Torino is still crouching over him. He points to Izuku's hands. "Those burn marks on ya. Where did you get them?"

Don't freak out. Stay calm.

Izuku is frozen, every movement of his stiff. It's like he's a deer being caught in headlights.

The marks on his palms have mostly faded. The burns that were

supposed to cover up his indents have gradually turned into the same shade as Izuku's skin, so he never thought it would be recognized so quickly. It's weird, actually, how Torino noticed.

It's almost like he was looking for it.

The voices are screaming at him in his head, and Izuku is aware that he really shouldn't be taking this time to mull over things, as that just makes him look more guilty, but what is he supposed to do?

Temples pounding at the onslaught of voices, Izuku yells back at them to shut the hell up, as he can't even think straight.

Make something up. Anything. Come on, come on. It's not a big deal. Make it seem like you totally forgot about it!

"Oh! That! It's…" Izuku chews on his lip, pretending to think. "I, uh, got hit! With a fire quirk. While… I was… patrolling."

Torino looks unsatisfied. "In the same spot on both hands?"

Busted.

"Yeah!" Izuku laughs. "I know, it sounds crazy, right?"

"Right. Almost made up."

For what feels like the longest time but what can only be a few seconds, they're at a stalemate. Izuku's skin is prickling, like someone is taking tiny needles and using his skin as an acupuncture lesson. Is Torino waiting for Izuku to break, or is he just deciding on what to think.

Izuku can barely feel the ground beneath him, his mind is floating so high up.

"C'mon," Torino says abruptly, that switch being flipped immediately as he returns to his normal self. "We're not stopping until you perfect that last move, boy. And then I'm buying some grub after this. It's past time for some lunch."

Another kick to the face marks the continuation of that, much to Izuku's relief. God, he was about to shrivel up and die right there if the conversation didn't take that turn there.

There's no way he could possibly know, right? Izuku is probably just stressing for nothing!

By the end of the day, Izuku hasn't made much progress, at least not by his own standards. After patching up the battered couch and deep cleaning it of the ketchup that was smeared on it, Izuku prepares to use it as his bed.

Actually, it took him more than two hours to thoroughly clean this entire floor. Aizawa would pass away if he saw all the filth living inside this building.

It was enough to almost take Izuku down!

He checks his phone and replies to all of Yagi's concerned messages with a simple ***I survived!*** and a recap of everything that happened, leaving out certain bits, of course.

He then chats more with Kacchan, hearing about how terrible his own internship is going, and texts Yamada and Aizawa in the group chat they share. He sends a simple cat meme that reads: *clawing my way to victory!*

It's getting dark fast, and Izuku's mind wanders to the food Gran Torino shared with him at lunch. He itches to go out into the city, as his Rabbit costume (he was forced to scrub that, too) is right here with him. But he knows he might get caught, and he really isn't about to ignore one of the rules Yama gave him that morning about patrolling during the internship.

Later, he promises. *Maybe while Torino is asleep, I can practice things on my own.*

Izuku is left to stare up at the cleaned ceiling and wonder just how he's going to perfect those moves they were messing with before. Are they really supposed to help him train himself to use One for All more naturally?

He's excited about finding the answer to that question, if a little apprehensive. He hasn't felt this way about training in a long time. Not since… not since *he* promised to make him stronger.

Well, either way, Izuku is looking forward to getting the shit kicked out of him again in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

check out this song on youtube
(Ty for 400k hits 🥺💕)

k

special occasions

Chapter Notes

nomu 👹🖋 double update soon □

(cw: mentions of crowd stampede)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is in the middle of a great dream when it happens. Well, not *great,* but it definitely isn't the worst dream he's ever had!

It's just a little weird if he's being honest. He's back in the void realm, as he's so creatively dubbed it, and the monsters are there and watching again. They try to attack him as they did before, but Izuku finds that he has much more control over himself and his surroundings than he did previously.

He can move faster. He can think *quicker.*

And the monsters can't touch him here. It's like an invisible layer of infinite space rests just above his skin, making it so he's a literal walking god.

Well, a dreaming god.

That's only when he's thinking about it, though. If he lets his guard down for even a second, the creatures go for his throat with a sort of desperate vengeance.

In this void realm, it's clear that Izuku is still only a little bit in control.

He puts his hands in his pockets, looking at the stars and colorful galaxies filling up the space all around him. Last time it was all just blackness, right? It wasn't like this before. That *has* to be a good thing, Izuku thinks.

He follows the brightest star until he comes upon that same pool he nearly drowned in last time. He stares down into it, looking at his reflection in the writhing black sludge.

The water is alive, that's for sure. But is he going to stick his hand in there again? That's a *big* fucking nope.

He's not that dumb, thanks. He doesn't want to drown again tonight—

The space around him suddenly vibrates and shakes, pressing against him until he's being shoved forward face-first into the pool of stars.

A shock goes up his spine like an electric current when he hits the water, and it's enough to have Izuku's eyes flying open, heart constricting inside his chest once he realizes he's flying through the air in real-time.

One for All wraps around him like a blanket immediately upon being called, and Izuku rights himself so his feet land on the wall perfectly. He grabs onto the shelf beside him so he can hang there and let his eyes adjust to the darkness for just a second.

A surprise attack.

Izuku sees movement and doesn't waste any time before bunching his legs and soaring across the room. He lands in the small kitchenette and grabs the steak knife that was left out from dinner.

He crouches on the counter and positions himself in a defensive stance, crossing his arms in front of him so the blade is on full display —a warning.

The only thing he gets in reply, however, is a sharp, startled laugh from somewhere in the dark. "A knife? Really? Did Toshi teach you that?"

Izuku blinks, not moving from his spot. "Torino, sir?"

"I thought your weapon of choice was a *bōstaff."* Right as the last word is spoken, Gran Torino comes at him again, this time from behind, and Izuku is sent flying back towards the center of the living room. "What, did you have to improvise?"

Izuku, now certain this isn't some attack by an outside party, huffs moodily and forces himself to relax. *He woke me up out of that dream for this? More training? I was about to explore the place!*

"Yeah, well, it's not like I was expecting an early morning ambush to happen," he mutters, his face souring.

"And that's exactly why you're *stupid.* You should always be prepared for anything the world might throw at you." Gran Torino fixes Izuku's stance into an offensive position (did he literally just fucking teleport

to Izuku's side?), his cane whacking his shins as an incentive to stay like that. "Nothing is a surprise as long as you don't make it one."

"Uh, I don't think that's—"

Gran Torino balances on the tip of his cane and suddenly manages to look Izuku straight in the face. "Learn how to read people's tics, and you'll never be left struggling to make a plan or to decide which of your quirks to use."

Izuku frowns. "Didn't you tell me not to analyze so much in the middle of a battle? How can I know how to predict their movements if I can't even spend time watching them?"

"You have to just know," he says gruffly, as if this is common knowledge. "It should be instinctual after a while."

"Wow. Y'know, I see where All Might gets his teaching methods fr—" Izuku lets out an inhuman screech when the knife in his hand is yanked from his grasp and suddenly thrown right back at him from the other side of the room. He only has a millisecond to react, so Izuku doesn't think; he just *does*.

Boost has always come to him quicker than any of his other quirks, so he doesn't even have to think about it for it to happen. He jumps and spins in midair at the speed of a .220 cartridge, eyes wide and lips parted as he kicks the knife upwards first to redirect its momentum and then again at the hilt of the blade to send it spiraling right back towards the goddamn *menace* that is Gran Torino.

Torino doesn't move out of the way, though Izuku isn't that conceited to think it's because he couldn't. The old hero simply chose not to.

The knife flashes in the dim light around them and makes its home in the wall right next to Torino's head, and it would've nicked the thin outer shell of his ear had he not tilted his head just the slightest bit away.

And Izuku, who is still stuck on the fact that Torino just threw a whole ass knife at him at Mach 20 speed without warning, just blinks. He's back on the ground, breaths stuttering.

"Are you trying to *kill* me?" He mutters, mostly to himself. (And if he sounds maybe a little too excited about the idea of that, no one will know.)

“Hah! You’ve sure got his knife work, huh, brat?”

Izuku frowns and tips his head. “Eh? I’ve never actually seen All Might use a knife for heroics before, and he refuses to use one with me during training, so I wouldn’t know.” He perks up. “Is he good with them?”

I’m gonna force him to fight me with one next time we train.

Gran gives him a *what the hell are you talking about?* look before ultimately deciding to just ignore him. “Now, *that’s* what I’m talking about! That’s the fastest I've seen ya react to a move so far, so obviously it’s not impossible for you. You need to be able to do that all the time, kid, without hesitation and without any stupid thinking.”

Stupid thinking? Izuku crosses his arms, feeling the need to defend himself just a little, and speaks with utmost sarcasm. “I’ve never had a dumb thought in my life, sir. All my decisions are smart and carefully planned ou—”

“You shooting that boy during the festival was stupid,” Gran interrupts, jumping up on the counter to mimic Izuku’s earlier pose. “And unnecessarily flashy.”

“I told you, I’m not *flashy!”*

“And Rabbit isn’t either?”

Izuku snaps his mouth shut and narrows his eyes. Gran Torino, he finds, has the extraordinary ability to piss him off without doing much of anything. He hasn’t said anything but the truth, honestly, and yet here Izuku is, brimming with annoyance.

I wonder if All Might ever had enough of you and tried to just beat your ass one day, he thinks. *I know I probably would’ve tried. Whether or not I’d win is another thing...*

Gran doesn’t look to be trying at all, but he’s still managed to make Izuku bloodthirsty every other minute. Even when Izuku was trying to peacefully clean the place earlier, Gran was interrupting him and saying things like *you missed a spot* and *if only Toshi did that whenever he messed up our training grounds.*

No doubt in attempts to distract Izuku, not that it worked; Izuku values cleaning more than his or All Might’s honor, unfortunately.

“You panic when you don’t know something, or when you’re unsure.” Gran is behind him, feet planting on Izuku’s back before the boy even realizes what’s happening. “You need to stop your guessing and hesitating.”

Ugh. This again. You’ve gotta be talking in circles now.

Izuku hits the ground on his side but immediately rights himself, muscles tense as he goes for Gran first this time. Training with All Might is similar to this (getting thrown down and having to pick himself back up and fix his mistakes, over and over again), but there isn’t nearly this much talking. Yagi only ever likes to tease during fighting—criticism comes *after* the spar.

“Your quirks are extensions of the body,” the hero says, ducking under Izuku’s swipe and kicking him in the stomach. “You should be able to use them like you use your own hand to—” (Izuku holds back a joke here, knowing from previous experience that it’s within his best interest.) “—write and balance yourself. And from what I can see so far, you’re not too bad at that with your original quirk. It comes naturally to you, right?”

Izuku averts his eyes. *“Boost* is almost always active.”

“Good. So you should be striving to make One for All the same. Now,” Gran says, holding a hand out in front of him and grinning, the faint light from outside illuminating his small form, “show me just how *smart* you can be, kid.”

Izuku pauses. “You want to keep fighting? Again? At…” He glances at his phone, which is now discarded a couple yards off to the side. “Three in the morning?”

“Your patrols usually last longer than this,” Gran huffs, impatient at all the holdups. “Why are you so worried? This too much for ya, boy? Need one of your teachers to come pick you up?” The words are said just to rile Izuku up, and while the boy knows this, logically, it’s still a bit humiliating.

His eyes twitch, his blood rushing just a little faster inside him now. He honestly never expected Gran Torino to act like *this* just to get him to fight truthfully. It’s traitorously familiar.

“No. This isn’t a problem at all.” Izuku gets in his offensive position, the same one his father has shown him so, *so* many times before, and slows his breathing so he can hear the world around him better than

before. So he can *feel* everything better. "'Sides, I fight best in the dark."

Izuku couldn't ask for a better way to start the early morning.

The entire bottom level is in shambles by the time noon rolls around. *Again.*

The top floor isn't much better, as Izuku had to find his way up there when Gran tried to shake him off. Footprints are scattered all over the walls and ceilings now, with holes periodically existing in between them. It turns out that Gran knows how to throw just about anything over a long distance—even a whole damn vacuum!

His aim is spectacular, and so is his dodging, so Izuku didn't bother trying to grab for a knife again. It would've only been disadvantageous to himself and helpful to his opponent.

There are bruises forming all over Izuku's skin, with bandages covering the little nicks he received from minor slip ups. But other than that? Izuku feels *great.*

"All Might can't be in his big form for too long anymore," Izuku says, currently lying on the cold floor. He's so hot and sweaty that the chill is doing wonders on him. "He can't do long practices like this with me because of that, so this is fun, sir. Really."

"Yeah, well, that brat can't do a lot of things," Gran mutters, eating his taiyaki and making Izuku frown at him.

What do you mean by that?

Izuku turns his face back to the ceiling, eyebrows pinched. Yagi can do more than any other hero. He *does* do more. So what is Gran even talking about?

Another thought invades his brain. "Hey, where did your white cape go? This one's a lot smaller and… yellow."

Izuku didn't really notice it before because the room was still incredibly dark, but now that the lights are on and the sun is up, he

can see what Gran is wearing.

“The white is only for special occasions.”

“So why did you wear it yesterday?”

Gran stares at him, and okay, maybe Izuku is a little slow. “You really ain’t as bright as you look, huh?”

Izuku perks up, suddenly happy. “I look bright?”

This earns him another disappointed huff. “I need to get back on my meds,” is all Torino says in response, hobbling back to the kitchen to get the rest of the taiyaki.

Mood , Izuku thinks.

He stays on the ground for another few minutes, cooling off. He wonders what Kacchan is doing right now. The blond better not be having too much fun, though Izuku doubts that could be possible with Best Jeanist.

The denim hero looks about as boring as two pieces of plain white bread. Untoasted. No jelly. No peanut butter.

Delicious in its own right, but still not that interesting.

You might’ve liked going to his agency, though, Voice #4 points out quietly inside his mind.

Izuku tips his head, thinking. *Nah, he’s too smart. Kinda scares me. Plus, I’m not a fan of jeanists.*

What did jeanists do to you? Number Five snorts.

I don’t know. Make jeans?

There’s a pause, and then: *Get help.*

Immediately, the words are followed by a loud internal slap, making Izuku flinch. As always, the voices are then cut off to him like a door being slammed shut, and he’s left to wonder why the hell not even the voices in his own mind like him. Well, okay, he doesn’t exactly have to *wonder* why that is.

The middle of his palms burn, prompting Izuku to try and itch them again. Every time he has one of those dreams or hears one of those

things in his mind, *Extract's* marks start to ache. Gritting his teeth, Izuku shifts onto his side and tries to ignore it. Hey, at least it's not bleeding this time! That's all he can ask for.

One for All runs across his skin absentmindedly, as if trying to help him calm the itch. He glares at his palms as if they've wronged him somehow, and honestly? They absolutely have.

His mind buzzes, warning him of Gran Torino's approach, though it still takes him slightly by surprise when the old man appears behind him and leans over. "How long did ya say you can keep One for All active for without injury?"

Izuku clenches his hands into fists and rolls about five times across the floor before standing up, scratching at the scar on his jaw out of nerves. "It depends on how I'm using it, but usually around four minutes if I'm just doing basic moves. After that it starts to, like, hurt a little."

"Hurt?" Gran walks around him and studies the red lightning, reaching out with one of his large gloves to touch it. "Hurt how?"

"Soreness. Like a sunburn that's been slapped a bunch of times. I can still use it, really, but it just gets kinda tiring, and I lose focus." He watches closely as Gran picks up his arm and makes it flop around. "That's usually when I mess up."

"Huh. And how long can you keep it up even *with* injuries?"

Izuku pauses. How can he come up with an answer to that when he doesn't know? He's never really had a lot of experiences where he's had to keep One for All active and use it even with the repercussions. The Nomu at the USJ is one example, but that barely counts. Izuku wasn't even able to defeat it completely; All Might arrived to fight it off for them.

So how long could he really go? If Izuku is pushed far enough, when will he stop?

The boy lifts a shoulder up in a shrug. "However long the situation calls for."

Torino stops his assessment to look Izuku in the face. His expression is relatively blank, but there's something in those dark eyes that Izuku doesn't like, so he can't help it when he averts his own gaze rather quickly.

After a moment, Torino walks to the couch, yellow cape swishing after him. “It’s important for us to know our weaknesses so we can rectify them before villains use ‘em to their advantage. So, learn how to go past your limits without actually breaking anything, got it? Turn that four minutes into five, then six, seven, all the way up until you can answer that first question with *forever.”*

Forever. No matter what the consequences are during it. *What does he think I’ve been trying to do since the moment All Might gave this quirk to me? I’ve been* trying *to master it.*

Izuku, after being forced to eat at least *something,* throws himself right back into endurance training.

Gran Torino wants forever, so Izuku is going to get there one way or another, even if it takes quite a bit of time.

And even if he’ll die the moment he achieves it.

Out of eleven different spars so far today, Izuku has now only managed to get Gran to bleed once.

That’s nine percent of the time. Nine.

Izuku is going to pull out his hair and force feed it to somebody, mark his words. That number just won’t leave him alone, will it?

Now, that’s not to say Izuku hasn’t landed good hits on Torino before this! He definitely has. But enough to make him *really* bleed? No.

Izuku dodges Gran’s retaliation attack and hangs back, watching the hero skid across the floor before righting himself. His large hand reaches up and presses at the deep cut going from the edge of his eye down to the middle of his cheek, and bright red blood oozes at the touch.

The only reason Izuku managed to land that hit is because he *maybe sort of accidentally* exploded the couch into a million pieces and sent the pieces scattering around the floor. That gave Izuku enough of a distraction to catch Torino half off-guard from above.

A fluke, in all honesty. Izuku is fast, sometimes even faster than he can keep track of himself, but not nearly as fast when he's trying to prepare one of his big attacks.

This is the point of this training, though. Izuku hopes to be able to get past that any day now.

Gran Torino smiles, and it's a crooked thing. Izuku's lips start to twitch upwards, too, as he's now excited that he managed to nick him.

But then another groan leaves him when Gran turns on him with a leer. "That was only three minutes and twenty seconds. Don't look all proud yet." His look forms into something more sinister. "We're not stopping until we get to five."

Oh, God.

"And you're paying for that couch."

Izuku doesn't mind that part, though he does roll his eyes a little. He knows the hero can afford to buy a new one easily if he feels like it.

But it doesn't matter. He has Nezu's credit card information memorized.

"What's taking so long?" Gran calls from the entrance to the building.

Izuku, who is still struggling to put on his knee-high boots in a timely manner, grunts in frustration. "I'll be right there, sir!" *It's just getting hard to put on my hero costume when I've already got another layer of shit on.*

"It's gonna get dark before we even get to the train station! Come on, do ya wanna fight villains or not?"

Phase Two of the internship is apparently that, according to Gran. He's going to take Izuku to another high-crime city and try to put his skills to use on a patrol of some kind. Now, that sounds like it's going

to be a great thing, but something tells Izuku that Gran won't make it that easy.

"It's not like I need the experience," Izuku grumbles to himself, only slightly miffed. It's around five in the evening, and it's the third day of the internship.

He wants to train with One for All more, as he doesn't personally think he's improved that much, but Gran seems to have more practical plans for that.

"I can hear you, brat! If you're that upset, you can stay here and clean more."

Izuku winces and stumbles once he finally heads toward the door, doing one final check to make sure he has everything. Yeah, like hell he's going to pass up a patrol to stay in this building and clean again.

When he walks out into the light, Gran gives him a weird look. "You look bigger than before."

Izuku narrows his eyes defensively, one hundred percent guilty. There's no way the man saw him put on his Rabbit costume before his hero one, right? What are the chances that he did? "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're a shit liar. And still stupid." Gran turns away, hopping down the concrete steps. "You better not do anything rash. Anything you do out here will reflect on me now that you're my intern. So don't do anything Toshinori would do, really."

Izuku falls into step beside him while they walk to their taxi. "But Yagi also said not to do anything *you* would do."

"Which is why I'll be kicking him extra hard the next time I see him."

This elicits a laugh out of Izuku, all bubbly and bright and innocent. Truthfully, Izuku isn't *planning* on doing anything bad. He's just being cautious, is all. There's this feeling under his skin that makes him want to claw his hair off, and it's making him antsy.

He's patrolled lots of times before, obviously, but never as Deku. Never as a hero. While the difference is near obsolete, it's still making him worry. And on top of that, Iida hasn't texted him back yet. He messaged him this morning just to see how his internship with Manual was going, and Izuku has yet to get a reply. Which is beyond weird, as

Iida makes it a point to always answer within three minutes of the message being delivered.

But anyway. On the off chance something *does* go wrong tonight, Izuku has to be careful about what he does as a hero in training. He doesn't have any kind of license yet, so he'll only be able to act with Gran's direct approval. So what can Izuku do in an event where Gran *doesn't* give him any orders? What can he do if Gran isn't there to approve of his actions?

Deku has to follow the laws of heroics. *Rabbit,* on the other hand, does not.

I'm sorry, Yamada-sensei, he apologizes preemptively, remembering how he promised the teacher before he left that he wouldn't even think about doing any vigilante work while at the internship. *But who knows what will happen here? This is just a precaution!*

Besides, Izuku brought a few of the new support weapons he made in Nezu's workshop with him. He has a few more of those light-bomb marbles, one firework bomb that's still a work in progress, and two clip-on, thousand pound-pull magnets—which are great for detainment!

Deku can't really be seen with those kinds of weapons, especially since they haven't been documented. He could pass it off as support items that Gran gave to him, but he doesn't want to push the small hero's leniency.

"What's that?" The man asks, interrupting Izuku's internal moral crisis. He's pointing at the wristband sitting above the fabric of Izuku's costume. "It's not a watch, is it?"

Izuku feels his cheeks burn, and he's suddenly very glad the taxi driver has a glass wall in between her and them. This is already beyond embarrassing to tell Gran, much less some other random person.

And in *uniform,* too.

"It's, uh, like… it's a location sharer."

"I figured that much," Gran grunts. "Who's monitoring it?"

Izuku bites his cheek and looks out the window, internally cursing Aizawa's name. "My teachers."

“And you let them?”

Is it just Izuku, or does Gran sound like he’s trying not to laugh? “I… yeah? It’s fine. It’s just for emergencies, after all.”

“And that button right there contacts them, huh?”

Izuku nods, trying to push away his embarrassment. “As I said, it’s, uh, just for emergencies.”

After a second, Gran dips his head too. “With a kid like you, that was probably the smartest thing for them to do.”

Should I feel offended by that? I feel like I should.

Izuku shoves his hands inside his hoodie pockets, fiddling with his compacted Rabbit mask quietly. They’ll be using the bullet train to get to Shibuya, passing through Hosu on the way there.

The boy yet again wishes he could just ride on top of the train once they arrive at the station, but he knows better by now.

There are not many people in the cart they sit in, which is just how Izuku likes it. The only ones on are people who are getting off from work or heading *out* to work. A tired-looking woman and her baby in a stroller are the closest two individuals to them, so it’s relatively quiet. This means Izuku’s senses won’t be bombarded with quirks or anything of the sort.

It’s already nearly pitch black outside, and the lights from the city blur together as the train zooms past. Izuku takes out his phone and, upon seeing Gran glance at the screen, quickly swipes up on some notifications from his clients at the club. *Wow, that would’ve been an interesting conversation.*

“On your phone again? Kids these days, I swear,” the hero huffs, shaking his head in typical old person fashion. “Always glued to that screen.”

Yeah, and I’ll glue your fucking dick to— Izuku cuts off his own internal mumbling abruptly, body going rigid when something suddenly takes a sledgehammer to the base of his skull, lighting his nerves on fire.

Something is coming. He can feel their quirk flying at them like acid dripping down the crevices of his brain.

His head snaps to the side to look out the window at the same time as the overhead speaker cackles: *"Passengers, remain seated. We're making an emergency stop!"*

No sooner does the last word finish than the train brakes, making Izuku feel another spike in his mind. This one feels more like a wake-up call, like a *remember who you're around, dipshit, you're a hero.*

Izuku only has just enough time to get up and *move* before it happens. Blood roaring in his ears, Izuku dives and grabs the mother with one arm and uses the other to cover the crying baby in her grip.

The explosion happens at the same time from the outside, and a large man with bear-like claws comes crashing into the spot the woman and baby were in just a second before. Izuku twists so they're facing away from the force and debris, thankful the floors of the train don't seem to be too hard.

Izuku is, for once, eternally grateful for *Extract's* premonition.

"Who is this guy!" A man in a suit exclaims, and others quickly voice their own shock.

"Is that a *hero?"*

Izuku tries to get a better look at the newcomer after quickly checking the mother's health, but then there's a rush of air followed by the creaking of metal, and Izuku's head *pounds.*

There in the newly formed hole in the wall is a large, lanky creature with four eyes jutting out of an exposed brain. It stands at no less than ten feet tall (and that's with it slouching), and has limbs resembling that of Slenderman.

Jesus, did I take my medication today?

But even as Izuku thinks this, the reality of this situation is already settling in, sending tingles of dread all across his body. Nomu. This is another Nomu.

Which can only mean one thing…

Gran, who was busy protecting the other occupants in the cart, takes off like lightning, fist colliding with the creature's abdomen with the added help of his air shots. "Stay there, kid!"

Izuku watches the two disappear into the darkness of the city beyond and curses before turning to pull the hero out of the rubble and check for fatal wounds. After finding none, Izuku yells at the civilians to take care of the guy and follows his mentor immediately. *Yeah, like hell!*

Did he really think Izuku was going to just sit around? Is he really that stupid? No, there's no way.

He leaps out of the cart and hits the ground running, ignoring the yells of the people behind him to come back before he gets hurt. *Boost* burns his legs, spurring him on faster. He shoots along the train tracks and scans the area for where Gran might've gone, but he's already lost them.

Shit! Come on!

It'll be much harder to search for him amidst all this chaos. Explosions are going off in the middle of the city, rocking the earth and surrounding buildings, and there's so many people screaming at the same time that the sound of it is like a constant stream of television static grating against Izuku's ears.

It sounds like an ongoing horror movie.

This Nomu has a different build than the one from the USJ, Izuku notes, panting heavily in the cold night air. *The brain is still exposed, but the eyes and limbs are different. It's a different color, too. Do the colors signify their rank or completion level? Or is it random?*

And how many more are there right now? With how the entire city seems to be in absolute chaos, Izuku thinks there's no possibility for the one Gran went after being the only one.

Now, Izuku might've actually stayed inside the train if the villain Gran went to fight wasn't a whole ass *Nomu.*

All for One business will always be the exception. To any rule. Izuku doesn't care who says what, he doesn't care which law states what bullshit—he truly doesn't. Not here. Not with the knowledge he has now that makes tonight being a massacre kind of night all the more probable in his mind.

"What are you planning?" Izuku wonders aloud, thinking traitorously of large hands and straight white teeth.

This isn't like All for One, but then again Izuku hasn't been around

him for years now, so how can he really be the judge of that?

For all he knows, his father could just be winging it.

Izuku jumps down into the middle of the commotion, eyebrows furrowed in forced concentration. Hordes of people push and shove at each other to get as far away from the fighting in the distance as possible, creating a deadly stampede. Some people are outright sobbing as they run with their belongings and kids while others are laughing and using this opportunity to break into the nearby stores.

Mob mentality, Izuku figures. It's easy to take advantage of events like this.

After helping the people who fell and are unable to get up amidst the panic, Izuku quickly goes for the looters nearest him, annoyance clashing with his fear. "The hell are you doing! *Leave!"*

These stores look mostly family-owned over here, which means thievery is a big no-no. That would be like if Tony's Pizzeria was looted during a big villain fight. These little fuckers think they can just steal from other poor people and get away with it!

After forcefully removing the idiots and urging them to go with the others to keep safe, Izuku keeps going in the direction of where they're running from. The screams are getting louder over there!

He rounds the corner of a street and nearly chokes on his own spit. He's now entering the city square, and standing on top of the large water fountain statue of All Might in the middle is—just as Izuku predicted—another Nomu.

All of the bushes and trees around the sidewalks are blazing, their fires combining together to create one large, raging inferno. The heat makes goosebumps rise out of Izuku's skin and causes sweat to start gathering on his face. The fires reflect in his green eyes, creating his own level of hell.

This Nomu is also not like the one from the USJ. It looks more… non-human. Not exactly better or more intimidating, but just *different* . It looks more like the ones Izuku was accustomed to back then. The ones he used to fear the most.

Being a few feet taller than the previous one, this Nomu has a set of green and pink wings that stretch out to twice its height. It has brains where the eyes should be, with five-inch long incisors on its small

head. Venom seems to drip from the fangs, and Izuku can barely move from his spot when he sees how the concrete beneath the Nomu sizzles and fucking *disintegrates* once the acid drops on it. Its long, feathery tail is home to curved spikes on the end meant for impaling and slicing.

The Nomu's multiple legs wrap around the All Might statue to keep itself from flying off when the wings start to beat dangerously fast. The wind it causes has Izuku's long hair flying around even with how far away he is, making him shiver again. The fires only grow larger with the added fuel of oxygen.

Is that thing… modeled after a lunar moth? Seriously? How ironic.

Izuku shudders once he catches sight of where the eyes are located—in the middle of the wings, right where the 'fake eyes' are usually located to ward off predators. And okay, *that* is beyond terrifying.

God, what has he done? How did he get this far so quickly?

His breaths come out quick, and the more he stares at the scene the more his hands start to shake again. Ever since the explosion in his building they've started to do that at random. He can't seem to get it to stop.

I thought I destroyed it all when I left. Izuku steadies himself. *No, I did. It was all unsalvageable; I made sure of it. So how did he…?*

Over the sound of the flames and the screaming is another noise: roaring. It doesn't just come from the moth-like Nomu in front of him, no. All around the city, reverberating against the skyscrapers and through the streets, are the sounds of other Nomu.

Oh, God.

Some sound almost mechanical while others can be classified more as shrieks, similar to that of banshees. Others, however, are low and staccato like that of lions.

And like the snap of a finger, Izuku is taken away and pulled into a darker spot locked away deep in his mind.

"Why can't I go with you?"

"Because what lives down there is not something for children like you to see. It's not the kind of fun that you like, my dearest boy. In fact, it's rather

unsafe."

"Oh." Izuku thinks for a second. His father is surprisingly patient in waiting for his next words. Usually he doesn't like to be kept waiting. "But if you're there with me I won't be in danger, right? You can fight whatever it is. It'll listen to you."

This earns him the smallest of smiles. Sensei's large hand rests on Izuku's head, pressing it down a little so Izuku has to struggle to look back up at him.

"I'm afraid it's not so simple."

Izuku looks away. "But Tomura is allowed down there."

His father takes hold of his palm and squeezes it in warning. "That's because Tomura is helping. You, Izuku, will only ever get in the way." He stops suddenly, as if realizing how harsh his voice was. He crouches down to meet Izuku's gaze, his soft eyes demanding his son's attention without even trying. "Let me rephrase. Izuku, there are monsters living inside these walls. I know you can hear them, can't you? They feed on your kind of naivety, my boy, and they do not answer to anyone as of yet. So listen to me now, and listen well, because I don't want to argue this any further. You will not go into that basement. Only the strongest go in, is that clear?"

Like a mantra, those last words repeat in Izuku's mind. He stares at his father, hopeful, and nods fervently.

"Repeat it," Sensei commands.

Izuku does, and he tells him again that he understands when he's asked. And as his father releases him and shoos him back off to where Kuro is on the opposite side of the facility and expecting the boy, Izuku waits. He watches his father disappear into the shadows, towards the shrieking, and the record is still going.

Only the strongest? He said only the strongest can go in.

Izuku will show him.

Even as a child, Izuku only ever wanted to make his father proud.

Chapter End Notes

gran is an instigator istg. he's a menace.

(that was a weird way to end the chap, ik, but again this'll be a double update! i just needed a spot to cut it for this chap. next one will be up in less than a day, promise!)

t

by your own hand

Chapter Notes

double!!! make sure you've read 47

(cw: slight gore, vomiting)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the screams of a kid that jolt him back into action, back into heroics. A little boy that Izuku couldn't see before is being held tightly in one of the Nomu's claws, struggling furiously to get free but to no avail. Ropes appear from his fingers in long lines that pool onto the ground below, likely due to the boy's desperation, but it's obvious he can't control the quirk well at his young age, so it's not like it's helping him at all.

It's attacking indiscriminately.

A man is off to the side being held back by two police officers, and he's wailing too as he tries to get to his son.

Teeth gritted, Izuku launches himself forward in a blur of red. His foot comes up to kick at the limb entrapping the kid, but instead of just breaking the bone underneath or shoving the limb aside, Izuku's foot goes *right through it* , cutting it off messily at the point of contact.

Yeah, this one is definitely not nearly as strong as the USJ Nomu. It's enough for them to be scared by, sure, but it's not an All Might level threat.

Not yet. This Nomu, along with the others (Izuku can only hope), probably weren't all the way finished with their enhancements yet. They haven't been perfected.

Father wouldn't be so dumb as to release them just on a whim. Did Shigaraki ask for this?

With the limb successfully being severed, Izuku twists and uses the Nomu's face as a springboard to shoot away and catch the boy, who's now crying a waterfall of tears. Izuku quickly covers up the kid's ears so he won't damage his eardrums when the Nomu lets out a pained screech, wings stretching out to their full size. He darts toward the father, not wanting to waste any time. Instead of handing the boy

over, though, Izuku just picks up the man and the two police officers with a bit of difficulty and bounces away towards a safer spot.

Depositing them all on the ground, Izuku points them in the right direction and (ignoring the father's cries of *thank you so much, dear God, thank you, you saved my baby*) immediately goes back to finish what he started.

The Nomu is now hovering in the air, wings flapping dangerously. The limb is already starting to regenerate, albeit slowly. Thick black sludge drips from the open wound and creates pools on the concrete, and the stench is almost enough to have Izuku rethinking his plans.

C'mon, he thinks, trying to hype himself up. *You've fought the better version of this once already, and though you didn't win, you didn't die either. You should be able to take this one down easily!*

One of the voices makes a negative noise. *You really shouldn't expect so much from yourself. You're still fairly young.*

Careful with the advice-giving, another warns, *he might think you're insulting him again.*

Are they being serious right now?

"Hey, can y'all stop distracting me? I'm kind of in the middle of something!" Izuku knocks on his head before gesturing at the Nomu, which is now—oh, yep. Too late. The limb has now fully regenerated since it was able to divert its energy to just that instead of warding off attacks. If Izuku had just rushed it, it wouldn't have been given that opportunity.

I should really start charging you guys for every thought you take up, Izuku thinks bitterly. *Now look at what I have to deal with.*

At least he has an idea of how fast the regeneration works. If he can just keep pummeling it hard and without stopping, Izuku should be able to find an opening to first go for the eyes if he needs to and then for the brain. The Nomu doesn't seem to have shock absorption or a large variety of other quirks, either, so that should make things easier.

The key word here is *should.*

Izuku stands there for just a second to take in the situation. The Nomu's focus has been shifted completely to Izuku, which is both

good and bad. Good because that means Izuku won't have to worry about the Nomu trying to fly away or go for a stray civilian, bad because the Nomu will most definitely fight at its full potential now that it only has one target.

He only managed to catch the creature by surprise before because its attention was on the boy and the three people off to the side. It wasn't given a chance to parry or react to the kick Izuku gave it. But for now, with only Izuku being the target of choice, it doesn't have to worry about anything but him.

Redemption time.

The Nomu lets out a high-pitched shrill before attacking, and Izuku swears he can feel the vibrations in his bones. He drops his phone and extra supplies on the ground before him, not wanting to risk them getting smashed if he gets hit, and powers One for All up to the fullest he can manage.

I can push twenty percent. Twenty-five only if absolutely necessary.

The Nomu, which Izuku is going to kindly dub Fraud Moth, flies toward him like a bullet, the sound of its wings cutting through the air resembling that of a train whistle.

It's fast, but not so fast that Izuku can't keep up. He jumps up high before it reaches him, leaving a crater in the concrete below, and aims a heavy blow in the creature's general direction. The force of the winds doesn't stop its attack, but it does slow it down. Izuku, who is still spinning from the momentum of his punch, flicks one of his fingers to send himself flying to the side in order to dodge the Nomu's dive.

Claws slice through the air right afterwards, making Izuku's eyes narrow. *Those things are long. If I'm not careful, it could cut me in half.*

New observation: steer clear from its damn talons! Which is, of course, a lot easier said than done.

Izuku's boots have barely touched the ground by the time Fraud Moth is coming at him again, this time with a vengeance and anger so palpable that Izuku can barely breathe.

Its shadow falls over him, shutting out all the light, and Izuku has no choice but to air-shot himself to the side and up to avoid being snatched. He grabs onto one of its wings and hauls himself up,

squeaking once he sees the eye staring right back at him. Oh, yeah, he forgot about that part!

He wonders how the Nomu can even see so well when its eyes are on its wings. It must have enhanced senses, too. Much like an actual moth.

Izuku rears back and plunges his hand through the feathers to grab the wide, almost human-like eye. Swallowing back the bile in his throat, he grips it tight and yanks it as hard as he can. It feels squishy and wet in his hold when it snaps free, but also firm in a way that reminds Izuku of ba—

Fraud Moth screeches, and it's like nails on a chalkboard. Izuku has to drop the eye in order to cover both ears, and in the same moment the Nomu's other wing fucking *folds* in on itself in a way that shouldn't be possible and bats Izuku off. Claws immediately wrap around his middle before he can hit the ground, cutting through his layers and drawing blood.

The Nomu keeps an unforgiving grip on him as it changes its trajectory, now flying straight up.

"Good thing I'm not scared of heights!" Izuku says, more to himself than anything. "But now I'm getting dizzy, so could ya let me go?"

His words are lost to the wind, though, not like that matters. Fraud Moth doesn't seem to be capable of understanding human language anyway.

Izuku swings his legs up so he's not just dangling, and he repeatedly hits the thinner part of the Nomu's leg to try and break through the bone. Why the hell is this significantly harder than severing off the arm? Were the legs made to be a lot stronger or something, maybe for landing purposes?

One last hit using twenty percent of One for All sees to the leg being snapped in half. The talons release Izuku, but he can't let himself be dropped. He's a good few hundred feet in the air now!

He grabs onto its ankle and climbs back up onto the wing, dodging another swipe from its other leg. The tail swings around to get him off as well, but Izuku quickly kicks it away, gripping the feathers around its spine for dear life. Fraud Moth wails again, but Izuku pays it no mind.

Thinking quickly, he places two hands on the sensitive skin where the wing first connects with the body and *pulls.*

He needs to get it to stop flying. The only way to do that is to force it back on the ground and keep it there, as simply removing its body parts won't do anything with its regeneration.

It's like pulling teeth. Izuku has to tap into twenty-five percent just to get it to tear a little, but once it happens it's smooth sailing from there. He grunts, pain wracking his body as he forcefully tries to remove the large, eyeless wing from the creature. He's halfway through when a lanky arm is flung back, attempting to grab Izuku again.

At the same time, though, the tail swings his way. He ducks and grabs it on instinct—which isn't the best decision of his, to be fair. One of the spikes goes straight through his palm, making him cry out. His own blood spurts on his face and drips into his eyes, and he can barely see when he uses his other hand to grab it and pull it away from the palm. He severs a part of it immediately, adrenaline making him manic. Grabbing the spiked end of the tail he's now managed to acquire as a new weapon, Izuku jerks forward and wraps it around the wandering hand, pulling it back until he hears a sickening *snap,* followed by a moist thump as the arm falls right next to him.

It rolls off into the city far below, probably on its way to scare some poor civilian or hero.

Wiping his eyes, Izuku blinks a few times to clear his vision and goes straight back to trying to tear the wing off, the tail still gripped in his bleeding hand. Fraud Moth is doing barrel rolls and writhing in midair now in an attempt to get Izuku off, but the boy manages to cling on by the skin of his teeth.

Once the feathered appendage is off, he uses the tail to wrap around the neck of the Nomu, now preparing to steer it back down. With only half of its wings for now, it can't stay in the air. They're now cutting through the sky, headed towards the city.

And towards the very hard looking buildings.

Izuku winces at the reminder of the helicopter fiasco. It's been a year and he's still feeling the effects of it to this day.

He chokes the Nomu while attempting to use the tail as reins. Far down below, he can see where they first were—in the square. That's

where he needs to lead the Nomu back to! He can't risk finishing this fight where people are at.

Izuku hisses when the other arm flings back to scrape at his cheek, but he only moves a little bit away, too focused on steering.

It seems that even though the eyes are located on the wings for this kind of Nomu, it still leads with its head and senses. If the head is pointed in one direction, it will go that way!

The wind whips at his face and hair, sending butterflies into his stomach. This high up, he can touch some of the clouds around him. It's chilly and moist, but in the way that dry ice is.

All too soon, though, the ground is approaching. The heat returns alongside the fire, and Izuku is forced to brace himself as the Nomu does another barrel roll right before hitting the ground. The concrete crumbles beneath them and sends up a billow of dust and debris, and though Fraud Moth took most of the force, Izuku is left having to roll off the back of the Nomu, clutching at his stomach.

Fuck, did that hurt. He's surprised his own skeleton didn't just jump out of him.

Something metal catches his eyes, and his plan comes back to him immediately. *Gotta anchor it. Gotta make sure it won't be able to go anywhere even after it regenerates.*

He crawls forward, trying to regain the breath that was stolen from him, and picks up the heavy duty magnets he dropped with his other supplies earlier. They're able to hold over a thousand pounds, so this *should* work. While the Nomu is fairly large, it's mostly made out of feathers and probably hollow bones in the wings.

Fraud Moth turns around to face him, mouth open in a scream and revealing sharp teeth, which is perfect! Now Izuku has the perfect angle.

He drags himself to his knees, palm now shaking uncontrollably and body aching, and throws one of the magnets at its exposed chest. Long electric spikes come out to sink into the skin and ensure it won't fall off, and Izuku feels excitement start to buzz inside him when he throws the other one into some cracked concrete and watches it do the same thing.

Boom. You're screwed.

Exactly three seconds after the magnet employed its spikes, it lights up a neon green, and immediately the Nomu is being dragged towards it against its will. It scrabbles against the floor and screeches more wildly, but it can't do anything against the two forces.

When its chest is being pulled flush against the ground, rendering it unable to pick itself up, Izuku moves quickly. In a move faster than lightning, the second eye is crushed underneath Izuku's boot, and the last wing is cut clean off with a small piece of jagged concrete he found on the ground. Ignoring its rage, he leaps up and drives it further into the ground by planting his feet on its spine.

Without it moving so much, Izuku now has direct access to its brain. He can either try to take it out completely or just smash it to bits. That last one is probably easier to—

"Mommy!"

Izuku's head snaps up, senses extending immediately. He sees a little girl on the ground on the other side of the square, trying to scramble back to her feet. But even from this far away Izuku can see that her foot isn't in any shape to help her move around. The fire is spreading to that area, and it's blocking off her mother from reaching her.

He can hear her panicked screams and pleas for help all too clearly now.

It becomes clear what they were running from when Izuku looks to the left a little ways. There, emerging from the street over, is another Nomu closely resembling the one All Might fought.

It's around the same height, and it's wearing pants just like the other one had. This one, however, has four eyes instead of two.

Izuku can only pray that the only thing the two Nomu share are physical similarities. He'll probably start crying for real if it ends up being a clone of that one. The last thing he needs to deal with is *that.*

But as it stands, it's obvious the newcomer is going after the mother and her child, which Izuku *cannot* let happen. He needs to either abandon this one and get the pair away or—

As if sensing the change in his demeanor, the Nomu beneath him finally moves. Quicker than Izuku can react, its neck lifts itself up and folds over into a *two hundred and seventy* degree angle, revealing jagged, uneven teeth.

They must've broken when the Nomu hit the ground! Most of them look to be about to fall right out, which is good. Now it'll be harder for any of the venom to get on him. He won't have to worry about the acid.

But that doesn't mean he won't have to worry about being bit, however. Izuku finds this out approximately .05 seconds later.

The neck extends like a collapsible pole and allows Faud Moth's jaws to close around the whole of Izuku's hand. Its teeth digs into his wrist and goes all the way to Izuku's bone, latching on tight.

"Shit, shit, fuck! Oh, you motherfucking *shit!"* Izuku's voice is high-pitched, a product of the pain. "Please don't shoot your acid in me, please don't shoot—!"

Izuku hears the mother and daughter scream again, and he pushes away his own pathetic feelings. *Save them, idiot! Get out!*

He tries to yank his hand out but only succeeds in making the teeth tear even further through him, creating a mini waterfall of his blood.

Oh, yeah. That can't be good.

Not even able to talk now because of the waves of pain overtaking him at random intervals, Izuku just keeps thinking of the civilians he has to save and starts punching the side of the Nomu's head to get it to loosen its grip. But Fraud Moth only seems to get even more pissed, quickly snapping its neck forward so Izuku is being swung over its head and into the concrete below. Now he's in front of it instead of on top of it, putting him at a disadvantage.

Something shatters abruptly, and glass embeds in Izuku's skin somewhere inside the mouth, and *oh.* Izuku is a dumbass. He's a Grade A *idiot* . Actually, he's past that now. He's something worse! He's a few levels above that title now, whatever that's called.

The panic button that was tied around his skin has now broken due to the force of Fraud Moth's handling. It's fucking obliterated.

Well, that lasted about five minutes. Izuku wants to know who made the wristband now, just so he can clown them. If Izuku made it, this wouldn't be happening right now, you can bet your ass that much. Was it Nezu? He can't remember at the moment, but he's for sure still going to roast him in his head.

It's only right then that Izuku realizes that okay, maybe he should have actually tried to press the goddamn button a long time before now, as that probably would have saved him some of this trouble, but did you really expect anything else from him?

Yeah. Yamada and Aizawa are so going to kill him after this—if he even survives in the first place! Which not even Izuku is so sure about. With everything that's happening right now, there's no telling what other astronomically impossible event will occur next. He might even lose his—

The Nomu lunges forward as much as it can, swallowing his entire arm up to his shoulder. The teeth sink in to puncture another part of him, and Izuku's eyes nearly bulge out of his head. Oh shit.

I'm about to get vored by this thing.

It's not as fun as it sounds. If it even sounds fun at all to normal people.

Yeah, you should probably pay attention, kid, Number Four snorts.

Izuku frantically resumes trying to dislodge the Nomu's hold, painfully aware of the way its arms and wings are starting to regenerate. *Shut up and pay rent!* He rears back his fist again, crying out when Fraud Moth manages to go even deeper. *Come on, twenty-five percent!*

This time, Izuku's fist goes right through the Nomu's neck and gets lodged in its esophagus. He can feel the muscles spasming around him and the sticky sludge-like blood now leaking from where the hole starts. In fact, Izuku can actually feel his own fingers in there that belong to his other hand.

He tries to pull out his fist and do the same thing to another part of the neck, but the Nomu just won't let go. The neck is already regenerating, closing up tightly around him. It's pulling Izuku in, and with each passing second the arms and wings grow bigger and threaten to grab at Izuku, who won't have any way to defend him from getting sliced in half.

No, no, no! He was doing so good. He can't let this happen. He needs to get those civilians to safety! *Extract* is telling him that the other Nomu is closing in on them, and fast, and *Izuku's not there.*

"Oh, come on! Let me go! I can't—I can't deal with you right now!" Izuku throws a frantic glance behind him towards the mother and

child, vision getting blurry. The fire is making him see people where there aren't any, it's making him sense quirks where there shouldn't be. Did the poison actually get through to him? Is that what's happening? "Let me the fuck go, you—!"

Two separate fists smash into the Nomu's neck from opposite sides, sending even more blood splattering all over Izuku's face. Skin rips and flies through the air, and Fraud Moth is nearly decapitated in the span of two seconds.

Its shriek cuts off abruptly, no doubt due to the vocal cords being torn out.

The blows create a space wide enough for Izuku to pull both of his fists out, thankfully. The boy plants a boot on Fraud Moth's chest and pushes himself off of it, falling in an unceremonious heap to the ground with dust kicking up around him and making him cough.

He hisses and cradles his arm to his chest, checking it over quickly. It looks *mauled.* Wide puncture marks and scratches go all the way around it in rings in multiple places, and some stretches of his skin is just plain missing, revealing pink flesh.

It's a wonder he didn't lose it entirely. If he's not careful from here on, though, Izuku knows he will.

That thought doesn't scare him nearly as much as he thought it would.

When Izuku comes to, he glances up to watch the two heroes zip around the Nomu and take care of the regenerating appendages.

"This one's a biggie!" One of them whistles, with the other one grunting loudly in agreement.

"Let's take it down fast!"

Woah. If Izuku remembers correctly, those two are somewhere in the top twenty. *Thank you. Jesus Christ, I've got backup. The civilians won't die!*

Looking back, he sees that another hero is quickly escorting the uninjured mother and daughter to safety while an extra pair are fighting the Nomu that was going after them.

Squinting, though, Izuku realizes that one of them isn't even a hero at

all. He remembers seeing them at the club sometimes. They must either be a vigilante or just some heroic criminal.

Either way, that's how Izuku *knows* the situation is bad: when heroes start gladly accepting the help of criminals or non-licensed individuals.

The community really bands together in the face of tragedy.

"You did good, son!" One of the heroes who saved Izuku from Moth Fraud says, flying right by him. "But let us take it from here!"

They push him back with a flick of their hand, and Izuku only just has enough sense not to ask what their quirk is. It feels like the complete opposite of *Pull!*

His mind pounds, and then someone else is approaching him from the side. She takes his palm without warning and spews out what looks like bandage tape from her cheekbones. It's coated with a wet substance that Izuku is sure is some kind of antibiotic or antidote cream, and when it quickly wraps around his palm to cover up the hole there, his skin tingles and goes slightly numb. The healer hero shakes her head when she sees his arm but doesn't hesitate in doing the same thing to that.

Almost instantaneously, his vision and brain becomes much clearer. There's no more fog, no more voices as of yet. It's like he was shot up with some kind of adrenaline!

It feels so good that Izuku briefly wonders if that's even legal. Oh, he would pay for that kind of treatment every day, trust that.

Just as he's about to bow to begin worshiping the hero, she grabs his arm and easily lifts him up. When she speaks, her voice is commanding. "What's your name, sidekick?"

She's checking if I can remember myself. Checking the extent of the damage. "I'm Deku, ma'am!"

"Where is your hero mentor, Deku? No one can be acting alone right now!"

Does she really think he's a sidekick? He's barely even an intern!

"Oh, I-I lost him a little ways over there!" Izuku points to where he can sense more commotion, guessing that that's where Gran will be.

“I’m meeting back up with him right now!”

“See to it that you do! Go quickly, and stay safe! That epinephrine will only give you thirty minutes before you’ll drop!” She joins the fighting with the USJ-Nomu lookalike, and Izuku watches for a moment with eyes as wide as saucers.

The meaning behind her words are clear: use those thirty minutes to get to safety, or to a hospital.

Izuku wishes he could follow her suggestion, but he knows he can’t. There’s still too much to do, too much to figure out.

Besides. He’ll be fine.

He keeps his gaze on the two separate fights for a minute more, just to see if they *truly* have it covered. It’s not that he doesn’t think they can handle it, it’s that Izuku knows how quickly things can turn south when you least expect it—especially when dealing with these creatures.

He knows all too well.

Izuku forces himself to shake off his worries when he sees them easily working together like a practiced team, with both of the groups restraining their respective Nomu.

He can feel more quirks heading this way, anyway, which means he’s not needed here anymore. If anything he’ll just mess them up with the way he’s acting.

Get a move on, Izuku! You’ve already wasted enough time.

After pocketing his phone and the remainder of his supplies (three light-bomb marbles and his work in progress Rabbit firework), Izuku is off again. He stumbles a little at first, the adrenaline pumping through him making him feel a bit high, but after a couple minutes he can barely notice it.

Gran. His priority is Gran. He has to get to him quickly.

He runs through the deserted, ransacked streets, helping the few straggler citizens get to safety along the way. He’s getting deeper into the city now, back into an area that Izuku is more familiar with: large skyscrapers, blinding, colorful lights, and endless alleyways.

This is more like it.

The farther in he goes, the less civilians and more heroes he encounters. Most of them are trying to stop structures from collapsing or fires from spreading, as they need to make sure there's even a city to come back to when this is all over with.

Which begs the question: just how many Nomu are out here? Izuku doesn't know how long he can help out.

Using *Extract* as his crutch, Izuku navigates his way to Gran rather fast. He's prepared for it when he jumps off the wire he's been running across and finally gets to see the situation. There are two more Nomu (Izuku is going to sleep out in traffic one of these days, fucking hell) fighting his mentor, and they each have a few quirks under their belt.

It makes Izuku's hands twitch for a different reason this time.

Gran is busy dodging and weaving the viper strikes from the lanky Nomu from before, and he periodically sends some blows to keep the other one occupied. That one is built pretty similar to Viper Bitch, but it's a little stockier and has two long, whip-like tails and cinder block teeth. The tails are each easily ten foot long and have a thickness of a good square foot.

It's obvious that while he *seems* to have everything under control, Gran is struggling. How long has he been keeping these two distracted? And without any backup?

Izuku's respect for him grows exponentially higher, and his heart gives a little jolt. *And you say you're nothing like All Might. Yeah, right.*

The boy goes for Dual Tail, thinking that this one will be his best opponent. He'd like to think he's pretty lucky when it comes to fighting things with tails!

His doctor at the Club would say otherwise.

He descends upon Dual Tail, only to have to use an air shot to dodge away with an undignified squawk when the Nomu quickly turns on him, long claws glinting in the streetlight when it makes a swipe for him.

It's like it could sense him before he could even come near it. Can it smell? Or is Izuku really just that loud?

Izuku flips and lands on his feet a good ten yards away, eyebrows now furrowed. There were ridges going along the Nomu's spine. He bets a hundred yen they turn into spikes or something! While that would be wicked, Izuku doesn't actually want to see it.

"Sir, thanks for giving me permission to fight!" He calls, slightly sarcastic and with his gaze still focused on his selected target.

Gran skids across the floor next to him due to a lucky hit and doesn't spare him even a glance before rushing at the other Nomu again. "I thought I told you not to do anything rash, boy! Why are ya even here?"

Yeah, Izuku is definitely insulted now. As if he would actually sit back on that little train and let others do all the work and fighting. That's simply not his style.

"You look like you need some help!" He follows Gran's example and leaps high up into the air, spinning fast as he uses the side of a building to launch himself directly at Dual Tail.

Gran makes a disbelieving noise, as if shocked by Izuku's audacity. "You're the one all beat up, brat!"

The air leaves Izuku when he's immediately met with a tail to the stomach. He's flung back, and he feels his lunch go up his throat and back into the world when his back hits a window and sends him straight through it. He turns over on his side, shards biting at his uniform, and heaves up the rest of whatever comes up.

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Izuku takes a second to compose himself, trying to ignore the smell of his vomit. It's a good thing this building is empty, huh?

He didn't even see that blow coming! It was so fast that it wasn't even a blur to him! It just *was!*

Okay, so the tails are definitely faster than the other Nomu Izuku saw. That's priority number one. Get those damned things cut off!

If Gran couldn't do it already, though, how can Izuku? He's gotta think fast. He's gotta come up with a plan quickly, think of which quirks he can use discreetly here that'll best help him. If he can just—

No. *No.*

Izuku brings up his palms and smacks his bloodied, dirt-encrusted cheeks. “Don’t think,” he pants to himself. “Stop thinking. Don’t overanalyze. Just… just *do* it.”

He needs to do what Gran said before. He needs to stop getting so hung up over things and just trust his instincts. In situations like these, you have to learn on the way. If you don’t, not only will *you* die, but everyone around you will, too.

Izuku… Izuku has to let his quirks do the decision-making this time. It should come as naturally to him now as writing with a pencil does, like Gran said.

He forces himself to his feet and limps over to the broken window, putting his left foot up on the ledge first so he can twist his ankle back into place. The white-hot electricity that shoots through him at the action, followed by the sudden *crack!* doesn’t really reassure him that he didn’t just make it worse.

Not able to dwell on it for long, though, Izuku lets himself drop from the opening and lands into a clumsy roll. Immediately, Gran is beside him and helping him up with a surprisingly strong hand. “Don’t get sloppy now,” he grunts, nose wrinkling once he takes in Izuku’s appearance. “Our job is to keep these things away from civilians. That tailed bastard is hard to keep up with. We won’t be able to attack it with long-ranged attacks, so keep trying to get as close as possible to it, ya hear? Its skin isn’t that hard to break through—it’s just the whips we’ve gotta worry about.”

“I figured that much,” Izuku mutters, hiding a wince.

One Nomu is hard enough to deal with, but two? Especially when one has two fucking lightning-fast long-ranged appendages? This has gotta be cheating. Izuku wants to smash Shigaraki’s face in.

“Remember what I said,” Gran continues, ignoring his sass. “Think with this—” He picks up Izuku’s shaking palms and then lets them fall. “—and not with that.” He jabs at Izuku’s chest at the last word, right over his heart.

And Izuku, for his credit, is pretty sure he knows what Gran Torino is actually referring to.

Swallowing back the lump in his throat (is that real or just another part of his imagination?), Izuku turns back to his Nomu and tries again. If Gran could handle both for a bit of time, Izuku shouldn’t be

getting bested by only one of them.

While the Viper Nomu that Gran is fighting is just crazed and erratic, moving like it's a spider on crack-cocaine at times, Dual Tails is more… reserved. It doesn't make sense, mostly because these Nomu don't have the capability of free thought, at least not yet, but it's almost as if they have their own personalities.

It's something Izuku has noticed since the USJ. The Nomu have this sort of attitude that drives them. It's like they don't just do things because they're ordered too.

Maybe each Nomu has a few remaining characteristics of the persons they were molded after.

The one at the USJ, for example, seemed to fight just to fight. It didn't have to wait for an order for each and every step. It was battling because it was made to. Because maybe it's *thrilling.* That adrenaline is what made it keep going.

Fraud Moth was instead panicked, jerky, and flighty (pun intended though not appreciated). It's almost as if it was unsure of what it was doing.

But *this* one? Dual Tails is intimidating precisely because it's so silent. It hasn't made not one noise since Izuku arrived. It sits in one place until Gran or Izuku gives it a reason to move by attacking it, and it doesn't outright go for any of them unless it will actually be able to hit them.

Which is weird. Usually that kind of pattern requires thought, something Izuku is sure they don't have. And yet it's still happening.

At one point, when Izuku and Gran are tag teaming Viper Nomu and trying to pin it down, Dual Tails doesn't even go to defend its counterpart. It simply waits for the best opening and then goes for the both of them in attempts to take them out, not because it's trying to save Viper.

So there are no familial relationships between the Nomu either, Izuku figures, going at Dual Tails for the hundredth time. *Inch resting.*

Its regeneration isn't nearly as fast as its reaction time, which is good. The rare hits that Izuku can land have a huge impact on it. He finds this out after managing to get close enough to land a kick to its jaw after using his fist to redirect the two strikes from its tails.

His blows, as few in between there are, weaken it to the point where it seems to decide to have its own mini evolution.

The spikes on its back grow like trees and curl around its own body like spider legs—no! Like ribs! The bone-like spikes wrap around the Nomu as an extra layer of armor, almost daring Izuku to try and attack now.

Izuku, who is starting to gradually see stars in the sky even though he knows there aren't any, turns to give Gran his best *I'm currently ascending* look. "You see this, too, right? This isn't just me?"

"Oh, *shit."* Gran curses loudly and stops pummeling Viper's limbs to fly towards the new attraction. It's obvious he's going to try and break them off to give them their openings back.

"Glad this isn't just me."

Izuku sighs before darting in from the side, muscles burning. He's about to overdo it, he can feel it. His skin is already starting to burn in that way it does when he's been fighting hard nonstop for too long.

The Nomu is predictable now, but only to an extent. It doesn't have any fighting styles, really. It does what it needs to in the moment to keep itself afloat, which is frustrating.

Huh. Almost like Izuku himself, who flits between using multiple types of fighting styles depending on how he feels.

Izuku leaps towards it, One for All instinctively giving him the boost he needs, and changes trajectory midair. Now he's above the Nomu and kicking away one of its tails, sending it towards Gran.

The old hero easily lands on top of it and uses it as a runway to face Dual Tails head on. Izuku, seeing his chance, goes for its nape from behind. Its second tail is again cut in half with a well-placed blow from Izuku, and for a moment it looks like both Gran and Izuku will be able to hit it at the same time from opposite sides, but then the Nomu (in one smooth movement), uses one arm to slice off the piece of the tail that Gran is using to get close, and the other shoots behind and grabs Izuku in a punishing grip.

Izuku gasps, scrabbling for purchase as his arms are bent at his sides, but he doesn't have to worry about getting crushed, as the Nomu just chucks him across half the road and straight into Viper's waiting arms. And—

Oh, shit. It regenerated everything again.

Gran's momentum doesn't stop, though. He keeps moving forward and manages to plant two feet on the bulk of the bone ribs, shoving them backwards so they go straight into the Nomu, impaling it.

Izuku wishes he had the energy to cheer, but he's just so *tired.* Gran has gotta be nearing his limit too. There's just no way! They've only been fighting for like five minutes, maybe less than that, but they haven't been able to rest once. And god dammit, where *is* everyone? Are they tending to more Nomu?

Dual Tails takes it in stride, though, immediately grabbing onto Gran's cape before he can fly away again and slamming him against the concrete.

Izuku's own shout is choked out of him, as Viper is now standing at its full height with Izuku writhing in its grip. One hand is on his throat while another is wrapped around his entire torso, temporarily paralyzing him.

The realization hits him like a ten-ton semi. He won't be getting out of this one by himself.

Izuku thrashes around to call for Gran again, but then he sees the grand sucker punch to the stomach that the hero receives, and his face falls.

And for a fraction of a second, just a *moment,* he swears he feels the man's quirk dim down, like an ant being stepped on.

It flares back up right after though, but Gran doesn't get up. Izuku can't even see him amidst the debris and smoke surrounding everything now. Spots dance across his vision, teasing him for his own shock.

Gran. Is he…?

Izuku feels him before he hears it. The air around them expands, the temperature increasing exponentially. Izuku's brain is fuzzy from lack of oxygen, but even *he* knows this is real when he feels the burning, *boiling* heat enveloping him whole.

Extract stirs, sending black sparks around Izuku's body, sobering him up.

Endeavor has arrived.

Red and orange fire races up the legs of the Viper Nomu and peels back its skin, eliciting a mechanical shriek from it. Izuku winces at the heat, thankful his hero costume is at least somewhat fireproof.

And also thankful that Endeavor has pretty good control over where he aims his fire.

Not once in his life did Izuku ever think he'd find himself sagging with relief at the number two hero's presence, but some circumstances change shit up, he guesses.

Izuku drops to the floor, drawing in huge breaths. He's been choked out so many times that you'd think he'd have grown used to it by now.

Heavy, retreating footsteps tell Izuku that Dual Tails got the same treatment as Viper, and Izuku almost starts *laughing* out of joy once he sees Gran pick himself up out of the crater he was shoved in. The hero only curses a little and rubs at his back, grumbling about how his cane broke.

Jesus, no wonder you've survived for so long.

"I was here hunting the hero killer," Endeavor says, walking toward the two Nomu with narrowed eyes. "Looks like the both of you just have some bad timing. I've already dealt with one of your siblings."

Izuku would've liked to see that, honestly.

Endeavor expels another building-size wave of fire, pushing the creatures back even further and making the air vibrate. Izuku, who was trying to stand up tall in the presence of the flame hero, only stumbles again because of it.

The large man quickly steadies Izuku with a hand, stopping him from eating concrete, but the contact is minimal. He scrutinizes Izuku and looks like he's about to say something scathing when his eyes catch sight of the blood now falling freely from Izuku's lips like a waterfall.

Oh. His *medicine.* It must be late if his body is letting him know he should be taking more.

Endeavor's expression turns even more stony. "Somehow I can't get away from you." He moves past Izuku and spares Gran Torino a look.

“I’m afraid I don’t know you, old-timer, but leave these two to me.”

At those words, Izuku’s face sours. He takes a step forward, determined to finish this now, but Gran is quick to swipe Izuku’s legs out from under him, forcing him back on the ground. “You’ve done enough. Look at yourself! Stay down now.”

“I can still help!” He retorts, eyes moving past him to rest on Endeavor’s back.

“Yeah, for how long? Until you keel over the next time that thing gets a hold of ya?” A gloved hand grasps his costume and yanks him so he’s only a few inches from Gran’s face. The suddenness of it causes Izuku to wrap a hand around the man’s forearm to steady himself. “I’m not gonna be the one to tell Toshi you died on us the third day of interning, brat. So *stay put.”*

Izuku’s eyebrows fly to his hairline, mouth gaping open a little. He didn’t really expect him to say something like that, to be fair. It was almost a little scary. *Okay. Yeah. Okay. He’s right. He… he’s right. The heroes are here, so I need to step back. I’m not professional.*

The thoughts are unfamiliar and leave a bitter residue inside him, but he doesn’t argue. He trusts that Endeavor and Gran Torino have this handled. Hell, as much as he hates to admit it, Endeavor’s arrival was like a golden ticket! It was insurance!

Izuku can afford to stay out of this fight now, but… he still has a job.

It’s not specifically a job he’s taken on for heroic reasons, more for personal ones, but it’s a job nonetheless. And it’s important. He knew this the moment the train halted and that Nomu crashed through.

Nomu means Shigaraki is near, even though Izuku hasn’t felt him in this city once this entire time. And because this is Hosu, Iida is here. Izuku is willing to bet his left pinky toe that *Stain* is too. It’s obvious. Hell, even Endeavor was here to hunt the hero killer! It doesn’t take a genius to guess this was his next hotspot.

Izuku, however, has just been too slow all of the other times to stop him. He was foolish enough to believe that he could still do this internship and have time to hunt Stain down. He thought it wouldn’t be this soon!

But he’s obviously just an idiot, and he’s paying for it now.

No. Everyone else is paying for it.

His vision nearly goes white with panic again, and that insatiable need of his to just *search* and *find him* is overtaking him like a tsunami.

Yes! That's his job right now. He needs to find Iida. He needs to get to him before he gets to Stain. Or, if Izuku can get to Stain first, that would be preferable.

It's instinctual, the way it happens. Izuku waits for when Gran is distracted, for when his back is turned, to make a break for it. Even while out of his mind and injured to all hell, Izuku can still be the most silent in a crowd.

He can still always go unnoticed.

It's not until he's made it a whole three blocks away, red lightning zipping across his skin, that Gran Torino turns and notices his ward is gone.

He isn't surprised. Only annoyed.

Because Midoriya Izuku obviously never learns.

Izuku is on autopilot as he runs across high rooftops. He can barely feel anything right now other than *hurt* and *pain.* The hero said he'd get thirty minutes at most out of the adrenaline, so Izuku thinks that he may have ten minutes left before he completely shuts down.

He doesn't know quite why he does it. He thought he came to the conclusion that this wouldn't matter at all since Shigaraki and Father and *Nomu* have come into play, but he begins to claw off his hero costume anyway without slowing down in his strides.

For what comes next, he *can't* be Deku. He can't be Midoriya Izuku. This next thing is for Rabbit only.

Maybe he does it because that's how it all began.

Back in a dark alleyway at two in the morning, when Izuku was eleven and fresh from escaping his father's hold. He had his All Might pajamas on (courtesy of Kacchan) and a shabby mask that did nothing to conceal his identity and was on a patrol.

Though at that age he barely knew what patrol even meant. He only ever heard of it from Kuro and the books he would bring him. Even then, though, little Izuku was already in love with the idea.

Nightly routes that you have to take to protect the people who can't protect themselves? To help set people on a better path and let them know that they are worth more than what they're told or what they think? What better way is there to be a hero than to do *that?*

Despite the skills his father and Kurogiri taught him and drilled into him for nearly half his life, Izuku was just too nervous and tired and *skittish* to do anything right that night.

It wasn't a patrol, really. Izuku just sort of walked around, shakily told off petty thieves and criminals, got laughed at and told to 'go home to mommy and daddy, kiddo,' and got lost multiple times.

To Izuku, though, it was enough. He felt good about it. He felt good because it was a start. It was the beginning of something that Izuku began, not his father, not his brother, not anyone!

Rabbit was his. It was his brand new secret that he could finally share with his best friend (is that what they were back then? Sometimes Izuku likes to think so) and with *no one* else.

That is, until the end of that first night. He was on his way back to Kacchan's house, as at that time he was living with them—though Auntie didn't know that; she just thought he was having an extended sleepover while Hisashi was on a business trip—when he heard screaming coming from far up ahead.

Izuku didn't think. He ran. He ran with his cheap, oversized 'hero boots' through the freezing cold, blood pounding in his ears.

He ran into that fateful alleyway and saw the *Hero Killer* standing on top of a hero, keeping a large knife hovering above their chest. Izuku, in his defense, didn't know who the Hero Killer was then, or what that scary man was even trying to be with those shiny katanas and flowing scarf, but what Izuku did know was that he *knew* that hero, had just listened to Present Mic's interview with them the night before, and was not about to let that hero die right in front of him.

All Might would have jumped in, and that's the logic Izuku used to hype himself up before launching his barely five foot, ninety pounds soaking wet frame at the villain.

Immediately, Izuku nearly got his head sliced clean off. But thankfully the Hero Killer was apparently feeling a little generous that night and wasn't about to kill a kid without preamble first. Especially not one who was just being heroic like the person pictured in their pajamas, as he said.

How kind Stain was, back then. Izuku misses those days.

(Can you sense the sarcasm?)

Izuku, shaking like a leaf in the middle of a thunderstorm, threw the saddest punch at the villain, making him take the tiniest of steps back, and planted himself between the Hero Killer and the hero, who was paralyzed.

And Izuku said, with all the conviction of a small kitten, that he wouldn't move and let the hero get hurt unless the villain killed Izuku too.

Stain, for all his credit, just shrugged and told Izuku that he'd be unfortunate collateral damage. But Izuku then took the hero's metal bōstaff, the first time he ever put hands on one like that, coincidentally, and prepared to fight.

How was he going to fight? Izuku had no clue. In fact, when Stain moved even a hair forward, Izuku threw the staff at him with a squeak, but instead of it even getting close to hitting him, it just clattered to the ground before him.

Stain looked at it, then at Izuku, then at the hero, and full on laughed.

And that moment, Izuku thinks, might be the very thing that saved his life, because right after that is when Stain made a deal with him. He said that if he could train Izuku and get him to help him on some of his journeys, he would spare the hero's life.

The answer to Izuku was a lot clearer than it should've been.

And so, for the next year or so, they trained together. It was hard, and Stain barely counted as a teacher, but his harsh methods and tough guidance is what Izuku needed so soon after removing himself from

his father's care.

Although Stain is not any kind of parental figure, as he's not nearly that soft, Izuku found himself gravitating towards the man. He thought of him only subconsciously as the replacement father he always wanted but never thought he deserved.

It's embarrassing to think about now, especially with who Stain is and what he does, but then again… it felt nice. It felt nice to be cared for by anyone, even if Stain was using him to carry out his ideals.

After that first year, however, Stain dropped him off at the Underground Club like it was some makeshift orphanage and disappeared, claiming to have taught Izuku all he could care to.

Izuku was left alone again, and that time hurt worse than all the others, surprisingly enough. Even worse than his mother, even worse than when he figured out what kind of man his father really was.

And isn't that shameful? Izuku couldn't admit he was orphaned three times.

He can still never get used to saying that. Because when you go through three guardians, three entirely different people with entirely different methods of teaching, and *still* come out alone?

You start to think that maybe it's not the guardians that's the problem; it's just you.

And here they are today. With Izuku tearing off his hero costume (he never thought he'd ever have one) to replace it with his Rabbit one, this one much much newer and nicer and more protective than his All Might pajamas all those nights ago. He nearly tears the stitching of his costume in his haste, but he can't stop.

He takes out his mask and presses it against his face, the smallest burst of satisfaction running through him when it immediately molds him perfectly. He throws up his Rabbit hood to cover his hair, not that he gives a shit anymore, and decides on skipping the gloves.

His bandages can't get ruined so soon.

Voice changer activated.

Izuku doesn't have his contacts, but this will have to do. It'll have to be enough.

The vigilante takes to the roads now, deciding it'll be easier to search that way. There's another fire up ahead, and a few late evacuees are running from it. Izuku sees a guy holding a flask, drunkenly stumbling away in the wrong direction.

Geez. He might get hurt!

Izuku grits his teeth and catches him by the back of the shirt, pausing to look around as he swipes the flask from his grip.

A nearby sidekick looks to be helping with evacuees too, so Izuku quite literally throws the drunk guy at him. "Hey! Take this one!"

The hero yelps as he catches him, staring in shock. "Rabbit?"

But Izuku is already moving, downing the rest of whatever is in the flask before continuing, as he needs to calm the cuts and burns all over his body. He can't fucking deal with this. He can't catch a break, can he? Nope. Fucking hell.

He is not emotionally ready for this despite trying to prepare for it for weeks now. Well, is anyone ever ready to go beat the ass of one of their most influential teachers?

Speaking of.

Izuku skids to a halt in the middle of the crumbling road, hands flexing and vision disoriented. He can feel it. He… he *feels* it.

It's the same aura he got from the figure who was staring him down from the top floor of his burning building that night. It's him, he's sure.

Positive.

Izuku lifts his head, and it's like *Extract* is taking over his visuals all of a sudden, because for a second there Izuku swears he can almost pinpoint the exact spot, the exact alley, that the Hero Killer is in.

But what makes his blood run cold is who else he can feel there as well.

Iida. You beat me to it!

Izuku is off like a gunshot, the sudden rage he's experiencing mixing in with the alcohol he drank and making him feel cold. His skin is itching again, warning him. Whispering to him.

He can hear some of the voices talking to him inside his head, but he's running so fast the wind drowns everything else out.

Oh, he's pissed. He hasn't felt like this since… since…

He needs to get back on the rooftops. He's faster that way! Izuku goes inside the closest alley and jumps between the walls to make it to the top of the twenty story building. He hops onto a balcony and flies toward the edge of a neighboring one, twisting in midair to aid his speed.

If Izuku could clock himself, he'd realize that this is the fastest he has ever gone. He makes it there in ten seconds flat, chest as light as a feather. Izuku is a flash of light around the corner of the alleyway, using One for All to bounce between the two walls again and propel himself forward.

He has his eyes set on the prize.

He zeroes in on Stain instantly, taking in the details of the situation whilst still flying forward. Just like back then, the Hero Killer is standing over Iida with his blade poised to strike.

You, he thinks sourly, that little bit of fear coming back alongside the anger. *It always fucking comes back to you.*

He sees the way Stain's eyes widen slightly when he spots him, but not even he is quick enough to move out of the way. Izuku rears back a fist and sends it crashing square into that disgusting face. The sheer force sends Stain flying backwards, but the man rights himself just in time before he can hit the ground.

His face is split open now, with little drops of blood coming down from his cheekbone. Izuku split his damn jaw by the looks of it.

The boy doesn't give him a chance to even think before immediately going for his throat, knowing not to hesitate when it comes to Stain. He rushes forward, a blur of power, but Stain's blade comes up and makes for Izuku's head. The boy saw it coming from a mile away and just ducks, the end of his hair getting sliced off as sacrifice.

The second blade comes for his stomach, but Izuku pushes himself even faster so it only slices against the back of his costume, not even making it to skin level.

Don't let him get any blood. Remember how you used to fight him. Come

on. Get close.

Izuku jumps up for a kick to slam Stain into the wall beyond, teeth gritted, but even quicker than him, the two katanas form an *x* and block Izuku from landing the blow. The smaller vigilante balances on them precariously for just a moment, suspended in air as he tries to break through the shield—a master's strength versus his student's.

Stain pushes him back and Izuku bounces with it, skidding as he lands back near the entrance to the alleyway. He's right in front of Iida now with Pro Hero Native on the side, who is most definitely already paralyzed by Stain's quirk.

"Ra- *Rabbit?"* Iida exclaims, panting.

Izuku barely hears him. He's focused on the pitch black of the alley. He doesn't see Stain yet, but he's obviously in there. *Extract* tells him so.

There's the sound of approaching footsteps, and it's the white eyes he sees first in the shadows. Izuku is rooted to the spot, his confidence waning.

Dammit, don't freeze now. You haven't froze in years.

Izuku pushes back the fear and tries to calm his breathing, but with everything that's happened in the last hour or so, it's difficult. He doesn't even realize he's starting to hyperventilate until his vision starts to leave him again.

"It's okay to be scared," his father's words come back to him suddenly, and it's almost like Izuku can feel the large hand on his shoulder and the voice in his ear right now, urging him. *"If you use that fear to spur you on, you'll be unstoppable. Don't wait for when you're not scared, Izuku. Just do what you need to while afraid until you realize there was never a reason to feel that way in the first place."*

Sucking in one deep breath, Izuku uses *Pull* to snatch up a broken, steaming pipe off the ground a few feet away. He doesn't have his staff or a katana, but this will have to do.

And he hates how practiced it is, the way he falls back into that same stance he was forced to use those few years ago. He hasn't used it in a while out of shame. But he knows now that it's necessary.

Necessary if he wants to have any hope of surviving this one.

He moves his right foot forward and straightens his back, holding the pipe out in front of him with one hand with the end pointed at Stain. With the other hand he balls it into a fist and keeps it a little ways behind him, still facing the opponent. It looks like he's about to gut check someone, honestly.

The alcohol settles low in his stomach now, burning at his insides and reigniting the fire in him.

Should I say something like we meet again *or is that too cliche?*

Definitely too cliche, Voice #1 replies softly, surprising Izuku. It's been a bit since that one spoke to him, since that time Izuku got frustrated and called him an annoying and doting asshole.

Izuku shakes away his thoughts. Now more than ever he really has to focus. He doesn't wanna become a shishkebab tonight, thanks.

The Hero Killer emerges from the shadows only partially, his face still mostly hidden not including his eyes. That stupid scarf is whipping around even though there really isn't a fucking breeze in here. It defies the laws of physics like Aizawa's own scarf.

"You know," Stain says, eyes glowing like two moons, "you've always been such an annoying pain, you brat."

"I get that a lot," Izuku says through gritted teeth. He can't think of anything snarkier. Hell, he can barely breathe in the presence of his own mentor.

But Izuku steels himself, his grip on the pipe so hard that his knuckles turn white. All he has to do is think of Ingenium, of Iida and Native, of *all* Stain's victims, all of the people that Izuku himself has hurt by doing nothing all these years, and he's ready to go.

He's ready to fight even though he's about two good seconds from passing out.

I've got like eight minutes of adrenaline left. We can do this.

Izuku suddenly remembers with heat rushing to his cheeks something he said to Aizawa that night when he was drugged out of his mind: *"I might kill him the next time I see him, though."*

Stain. He must've been talking about Stain. His memory has been hazy, but he's sure that's who it was now.

He doesn't exactly know how his sensei reacted to that tidbit of information, and nor does he really care right now, but what Izuku does know for certain is that he wasn't lying right there.

That bottle didn't cause him to make stuff up, of course not. It made him more *open* . More talkative. After all, a lot of times a person's drunk words are just their sober thoughts.

And that stands true in this case right here, right now.

Because if *anyone* isn't going to make it out of this alleyway alive, it's going to be that stupid, selfish, *hypocritical* bastard of a man in front of him.

Izuku swears it on his goddamn mother. He won't let anyone else get hurt because of his fear and mistakes. Not ever again. He should've put a stop to his mentor a long time ago, but here he is now, a couple years later, facing off against him for the nth time. In almost the exact same position, funnily enough.

Stain dies tonight no matter what. That part is an undeniable truth.

Whether or not Akaguro Chizome follows, however, is up to him.

Chapter End Notes

> when erasermic gets a ping on their phones saying the panic button was destroyed, only to coincidentally see alerts from other heroes about the situation in Hosu: 😒…□…🫠
>
> was listening to this song on yt while writing the Nomu
>
> (sorry for cliffhanger, but I couldn't let this get too long 👁👁 stain needs a whole chap to himself anyway lmfao. also. time for Izuku to experience Consequences)
>
> i

fear and other drugs

Chapter Notes

> people who don't like to share would rather break their toys than let someone else play with them 😏
>
> (cw: light gore)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is a woman buried in Naomasa's living room.

She's there, stuck in between a stack of newspapers and a few coupon books, silenced and hidden. She was on the news for a few days a long, long time ago, and then she was forgotten. That's how it usually goes with a missing person's case. But that time… it was almost unfairly fast.

To Naomasa, it was unfair how quickly her story was brushed aside, swept under the rug.

Her face and name were in the papers, along with a number to call for tips or questions for the police, and then she was gone forever. Just like that.

Everyone knew her for a moment and then in turn forgot about the woman who went missing and was never found again. The woman who left her barely six year old son behind to be taken in by an absent father.

It happens all the time, really, so why would anyone care? Why would anyone remember? No one ever does when it comes to these sorts of things.

But Naomasa does.

He kind of has to, but not just because it's his job. He cares because whenever things don't go right, or when something bad happens, he's always the one who has to take care of it. He's the one who has to call the parents of a missing child and tell them that they found their child… but not in the way anyone would've wanted. He's the one who has to call the partners of young adults when another fatal car accident happens on his time. He's the one to break the bad news to families, and while it happens all the time it never actually gets any

easier.

It never will.

So maybe that's why he's still stuck on her. Maybe that's why Midoriya Inko, the *one* case Naomasa couldn't solve, has been plaguing his thoughts again years after he was first assigned to her.

He sighs to himself, swiping his hands slowly down his face as he tries to wipe the sleep from his eyes. He doesn't remember the last time he took a break, but he's surely not going to stop now. There's too much to do. Too much to look into.

He—he should really be taking another look at the photos in front of him. The ones taken at the scene of the Abandoned Building Burnout, as the press has so kindly dubbed it.

Naomasa, however, has taken to calling it Rabbit's Reveal, just so the event is easier to sort in his mind. God knows he needs some organization around here. Especially now.

The details and pictures of all the victims are spread out before him, and Aizawa's notes are scrawled on the sides of them. The man dropped them off this morning, where Naomasa was then filled in about what's been happening recently with Midoriya. They're going to meet up again at Aizawa's apartment instead in a couple days to finish talking and to go into depth about some things (Naomasa needs direct answers from Midoriya, even though he knows Midoriya won't like it).

But even as he tries to distract himself with these thoughts, Naomasa eventually caves and reaches forward to take Midoriya Inko's old file from the stack.

He promised himself, after the case was forced close by his superiors and the board, after he attended Midoriya Inko's funeral (one of thousands he's been to, although this time the grave was empty) and saw little Midoriya Izuku standing beside the Bakugou family all sad and confused while watching the service, that he'd take care of her son.

He promised to look after him as payment for failing her. For not being able to figure out what happened, for not being able to *see*.

Midoriya Hisashi was not at her funeral. And that should've been enough to tell Naoamasa what was going on. Usually you have to be

missing for around seven years to be labeled legally dead, but they *pushed* for this. Midoriya Hisashi and the others… they claimed that all the blood at the scene proved she couldn't have survived for long. The man tried to say that they couldn't drag on the search because it would harm his son mentally. That it would traumatize him further.

Naomasa, though, could see past that act.

There were ulterior motives there. It was so obvious. He just couldn't prove it. And, God, that's the worst thing in the world. When you can sense something wrong, when you can fucking *feel* it, but can't prove it in the eyes of the law.

Midoriya Hisashi got off free. The boy, however, did not.

He was sent to live with him, wherever the hell that was, and Naomasa could do nothing more. He didn't have the grounds to do anything but watch as the social worker took Midoriya out of the room and back to his father.

Hell, Father, in Naomasa's opinion, is a strong word. Midoriya told them he barely even *recognized* the man he was then supposed to call *Dad.* He'd never seen him in person before, or at least not that he knew of.

And isn't that just fucked up? Naomasa has dealt with a lot of deadbeat dads before, but this case? This specific one out of the thousands he's taken care of? It rubs him the wrong way. It haunts him at night along with a plethora of other things.

It's like he's just drawn to the Midoriya family. Like his purpose right now is to—to *reopen* that damned case and help Midoriya in any way he can. Because the boy obviously needs it.

He looked after Midoriya in the years following that funeral. He took care of him as best he could without possibly getting him into trouble with his father. He tried to support him from afar, to be that steady but firm figure on the sidelines that worked to keep him out of jail, but he still failed him.

Just like he did his mother.

Tsukauchi Naomasa is doomed to fail the Midoriya family entirely it seems. His promise is on the verge of being destroyed completely.

The detective sets the file aside and interlocks his hands together,

pressing them against his forehead to hold up his face once he sets his elbows on the table.

Midoriya probably doesn't remember him from then. He was still too young, still shaken up from what he'd seen. He probably doesn't know that the younger, fresh-faced detective who got on his knees and took hold of his hand to garner his attention back then—and what sad, *lonely* eyes that kid had when he looked at Naomasa—is the same detective that he stresses out for fun now.

Maybe that's okay. Maybe that's something Naomasa won't tell him ever.

"Do you know who I am, son?"

The boy wipes his tearstained, freckled cheeks with a fraying sleeve. He sniffles, arms coming up to hug himself. He looks cold. "The nice lady said you're a good guy."

His words make Naomasa smile, but it's a little sadder than the kid can probably process. He wonders briefly who taught him the concept of a good guy, *but then his smile drops when he realizes he must've taught himself. That means he learned the concept of a* bad guy *by himself too.*

He's barely even six and yet he looks even younger. Malnourishment makes his cheekbones more prominent, and exhaustion and fear makes deep, dark circles out of his eyes.

In his other hand is a small, ragged plushie. It's All Might. The color scheme, although blackened with grime and dirt, is undeniable.

Naomasa tips his head and points. "Do you like heroes?"

The boy brightens a little at that, and it makes Naomasa's heart clench. But just as quickly as the change occurred, Midoriya goes back to being more subdued, as if reprimanding himself. "No, sir."

Naomasa hums at how quickly the lie registers. "Ah, so you just like All Might? I'm the same way. I like All Might, too."

Midoriya fidgets. He looks around. Stares at how Naomasa is still carefully holding his hand to keep his attention. "I—he's… strong."

"He's very strong," Naomasa agrees.

"And he… he's a good guy too."

Again with that? Naomasa just nods. "He is. He's pretty cool, huh?"

For a moment, the excitement comes back—just a flicker of emotion on the boy's otherwise indifferent face. "Yeah! He—I like him! He's… he fights all the villains!" He pulls away from Naomasa's grip and instead holds out his plushie as an offering, averting his eyes as if he can't look at Naomasa directly anymore. "And he always wins. He wins a lot."

That he does, *Naoamsa thinks.* You're very right.

"And I… I wanna always win too."

The phrasing strikes Naomasa as odd, as does the look on little Midoriya's face when he says it, but he doesn't pay it much mind. He won't until far into the future, when he's mulling over this same conversation and trying to think of all the signs he missed. Trying to think of all the ways he could've helped him back then.

But for now he just laughs and tries to put as much warmth into his voice as he can when he replies. "Well, if you put your mind to it, son, I don't think you'll ever lose. You can be a good guy, too. Just like All Might."

Somehow Naomasa knows this kid will be winning sometime in the future. Maybe not now, or even soon, but later. He'll be good, but only if the world allows it.

The hesitant smile that appears on Midoriya's face just makes Naomasa want to walk away and break down in private even more, but he keeps his positive expression up until Sansa walks over to talk with the boy, who gets excited upon seeing his cat face.

And when Midoriya is taken away to live with his father, it's not the last time Naomasa sees him, obviously.

But it is the last time he sees that All Might plushie.

His uneasy feeling makes sense when certain words catch his attention on the news. When his phone starts buzzing nonstop with Sansa's caller ID popping up and glaring at him in the otherwise dimly lit room.

It makes sense when he sees the headline and camera footage from high above the scene.

Hosu in shambles! Evacuations underway!

He feels the cold seep into his bones and the continuous vibrations from his phone on the table as Sansa calls him again.

The next headline flashes by, and somehow Naomasa isn't surprised.

Criminal intervention: Vigilantes and more on scene!

Naomasa's eyes go back to Midoriya Inko's file. His gaze rests on her face, which will forever be frozen in time. She looked tired when she took this photo. There are dark bags under her eyes, and the polite smile she wears doesn't seem quite genuine.

He wonders what she would think of all this. Would she approve of or instead be upset with her son? With Naomasa? Is there even a clear answer for things like this?

Either way, Naomasa has a new job. It's clear he has some catching up to do.

And now he has to be quick.

Izuku can count the number of times he's truly won against the Hero Killer on one hand, and even then he'd have a couple extra fingers.

Stain is fast, eerily so. And he doesn't hold back. Why would he, with the kind of person he is? For Stain, the weak will just get eliminated one way or another if they can't back up their talk, and that's that. Which is why Izuku is still, even here, even *knowing* and seeing all the bad shit Stain has done and *is* doing, grateful he was given the chance to learn from such a brilliant fighter.

He can respect the skill. He can respect the drive. But that doesn't mean he has to like the person.

He can't. Not anymore. If he pushes aside all those feelings of longing and hope he once had, his *craving* for some kind of strong figure to be around, maybe he never liked him at all. Maybe it was just Izuku trying to fill a hole in his life all that time.

"You—you shouldn't be here!" Iida gasps from behind him, struggling to move as he cranes his neck up to look at the vigilante.

“Tell me your blood type,” Izuku commands, ignoring him. *I can’t remember it right now. Fuck, I thought I memorized all my classmates’ shit.* His eyes are still set on Stain, muscles tense.

“What? What are you—? No!” The boy cuts off with a low cry of pain, and his next words are gritty. “Get out of here! Don’t interfere! This has nothing to do with you, *Rabbit!”*

He says his name like a curse, and irritation flashes through Izuku, warring with his fear. “It’s his quirk, dumbass. When he ingests your blood, it paralyzes you. The length of time varies depending on your blood type, so *give it.”*

“How do you—”

Izuku’s gaze snaps over to him, his anger winning for just a moment. “If you’re not gonna answer my question, Iida Tenya, shut your mouth and use that energy to get up.”

I can’t get them both to safety while having to distract Stain, so Iida will have to drag Native out by himself. I just need him to cooperate.

Chancing a quick glance back, Izuku takes note of Iida and Native’s injuries again. Iida doesn’t look too hurt, only a little beat up with a shallow cut or two—probably due to Stain. Native looks a little worse for wear, which makes sense; he would’ve been able to put up more of a fight.

That makes things easier, too. Izuku just has to wait for the paralyzation to wear off and provide whatever distraction they need so they can leave.

And hopefully get help.

Izuku stiffens suddenly. Help. *Help.* Yes, that’s right. His—his phone! He can—!

When he frees a hand and shoves it inside his inner jacket pocket, he can’t even be surprised when he doesn’t find what he’s looking for. His phone is just not there.

Wrong jacket, Voice #5 snorts.

Izuku remembers it now: he put his phone in one of his hero costume compartments after picking his stuff up from the ground. And when he changed out of it and into his Rabbit costume, he left his phone in

there. On that rooftop.

Fuck.

You know, you could've told me that sooner, you bastard.

He gets no reply, as expected, but then his fingers touch something else in his pockets, and his heart skips a beat.

His single firework. The custom one he made in case he ever needed to escape the grasp of a certain flame hero. There's also a couple of his remaining marble bombs, which he can use to his advantage here.

But right here, what will help him the most is… it's…

"He should have a calling symbol," Todoroki says abruptly. "For when he needs to call for backup."

"Backup?" Izuku questions. "He's still a criminal, so I can't see him with any pro heroes as allies."

"In the right circumstance, anyone would be willing to help."

Todoroki was right then. He had a point, and thinking back on it, Izuku is so, so grateful the boy said that to him, otherwise he wouldn't have thought about doing this next action.

Now, Izuku knows it's risky, knows that it could attract more bad attention than good, but he has no choice now, right? He has to do everything in his power to help.

Izuku bites the inside of his cheek, hard enough to taste blood, and rolls his work in progress firework around his fingers.

"You've grown," Stain says in a surprisingly neutral tone, making Izuku falter for just a second.

Not in front of them, you asshole. Don't out me like this.

Stain could so easily do it. But will he? The other vigilante's face morphs into a sharp grin. This is *funny* to him. He may as well be laughing.

"That's what happens when you get dropped off to live by yourself for a few years," Izuku says quietly, fighting to keep calm.

"You made it farther without me than you would've if I allowed you

to stay," Stain counters easily, and with these words he brandishes his blades and holds them in an *x* pattern, as if in invitation. "Besides. You were growing too fast. You would've fought against me sooner or later." Despite the context, he doesn't sound upset about it. It's like he was expecting it and almost wanting it to happen. "It's a custom for people like you."

Like a lion casting his son out from the pride once he gets old enough to be a competitor. Stain left Izuku alone because he didn't want to put him in a weird position, as he was quickly forming his own thoughts and morals and soon would've had to betray his mentor one way or another.

"And it's a custom for people like you to rot in Tartarus," he says, sounding much steadier than he feels.

But it still must not be good enough, however, as Stain just laughs. "If I am to rot, you'll be in the cell right next to mine just for being what you are."

Izuku swallows and rolls his neck, trying to loosen his shoulders and muscles. *Don't listen. Stop talking. Stain can never be reasoned with. You know this.*

Forcing himself to just do it and *stop* hesitating, Izuku presses the button on the side of his invention and readies himself as a flare ignites from the bottom and sends it shooting up through the sky like a rocket. He watches how Stain's eyes flit up and follow the bomb until it eventually explodes in a blinding display of fire and neon green smoke. Except the first explosion was just to push the other miniature ones outward, so just a split second later there are more tiny ones that ignite and form the shape of Rabbit's newly updated symbol—complete with the ears and everything.

If it were any other time, Izuku would preen at the fact that it worked, but now he has something else to focus on.

I'm hoping that'll bring other heroes here. Stain won't bother fighting multiple pros at once, as he gets overwhelmed quickly. I just have to keep him here and pin him down like an insect until help arrives.

He just has to survive long enough and keep Native and Iida alive.

"Your theatrics haven't changed," Stain notes, and Izuku hates that he's still talking. *Why* is he talking? Why is he dragging this out? Usually he hits first. Talking comes later or not at all for the two of

them. “You’re not made to stand out, so you’ve always had to compensate for it.”

He’s trying something out. He has something planned. He’s toying with Izuku, isn’t he? But Izuku thought he wouldn’t ever stoop that low. He doesn’t have time for that usually. Why do it now? Is Izuku looking too much into it?

“Rabbit,” Iida pants from below, still struggling to move—reminding Izuku that there is, in fact, another person here. “You can’t be here. I said get *away—!”*

He’s cut off immediately by the hero killer, as Izuku can’t seem to find his voice. “A boy shows up and puts himself in harm’s way to protect you, and you refuse to accept his help.” Stain rolls his eyes, his neck following the motion in a slow yet jerky manner. It reminds Izuku of a rickety old bridge. Stain’s gaze focuses back on him. “This is what I was telling you. There are selfish heroes in this world, brat. Culling them is my duty. So… you will move out of my way, Rabbit, or *be* moved. Which is it?”

The specific choice of wording catches Izuku’s attention, and he latches onto it. “You won’t kill me,” he says, and it’s not a question. *You’ve been watching me all this time. You left that note for me as a heads up, you killed those people, you saved Missy… I know you still lurk, Stain. Would you really get rid of me so easily after all that effort? I know you still want something from me.*

“You’re a bother to deal with these days,” Stain says as if hearing Izuku’s thoughts. “I let it slide the other times, but if you interfere with my work now you’ll be wishing you were left in that burning building that night instead.” He takes a step, his body illuminating completely as he moves further into the light, and Izuku instinctively takes one back in response.

Stain always knows just where to hit to cut Izuku the deepest.

Iida sputters. “What is he—”

Too late. Stain has always been impatient. There’s a flash of silver, and Izuku only just barely has enough time to bring the pipe up in front of him to block the dual-sword strike that Stain releases. It’s like he fucking teleported right in front of Izuku when the boy was distracted, even if it was for less than a moment.

Six minutes of that adrenaline left before you keel over, his mind supplies,

and Izuku grits his teeth as he's slowly pushed back due to the force Stain is applying. His boots slide against the wet asphalt, and when Izuku's heel touches Iida's shoulder, who's still on the ground, he has to make a split-second decision.

Stain's left forearm twitches, moves, and the grip he has on one of his blades changes. Izuku sees the way his eyes dart *ever* so quickly to Iida's form, and the realization of what the other vigilante is about to do hits him like a two-ton semi.

Boost burns at his muscles and leaves them aching once Izuku gets a foot under Iida's chest and promptly sends him flying backward with a kick. The blue-haired teen muffles a pained gasp as he skids across the concrete and into the open road, but Izuku feels no sympathy for him, as Stain's blade immediately comes down right at the spot where Iida's neck was just a second before.

"Bastard," Izuku hisses, fury making his insides coil up tight. "Don't *touch him!"* He pushes back hard with his pipe and jumps up to grab onto a fire escape before Stain can launch the next attack on him. He uses the brick wall as a springboard and flings himself at the man's exposed back from a new angle, aiming a nasty blow at the side of his head—something that would surely split it open.

But Stain sees it coming and is much, much quicker. His neck snaps toward him and he twists, dropping one of his katanas and using his free hand to grab the underside of Izuku's fists, which are wrapped around the pipe.

His leg comes up at the same time and hits Izuku squarely in the chest now that the boy can't slice him, sending him sprawling. The foot came in contact with one of Izuku's previous wounds from the two-tail Nomu, so for a heartbeat there all he can see is white as pain wracks through his entire nervous system.

Geez. If only the adrenaline could numb him completely.

Izuku rights himself and grimaces upon seeing the miniature daggers that Stain is now throwing at him. Well, not exactly miniature. The tantōs are around five inches in length and sharpened at the center of the blade on the end, making it the perfect tool for lodging inside someone.

This type of attack is practiced. Stain used to test Izuku's ability to dodge and block all the time, and when Izuku started using a bōstaff, not getting hurt became a much more common occurrence. But the

pipe in his hand is a lot heavier and unbalanced than any bōstaff Izuku has ever used, even the beat-up ones he made in the very beginning when he was first starting out. So while he quickly blocks and even hits some of the tantōs back at Stain, he can't get all of them. Izuku tips his head to the side with wide eyes so one of the daggers only slices his cheek and nicks the tip of his ear as it glides past.

Shit.

Izuku frees a hand and jerks it back, palm open as *Pull* manifests on his fingertips. The connection is made, and the dagger comes flying back to rest in Izuku's hand before it can clatter to the ground. He can't let Stain get a hold of it when it has his blood on it, so leaving the knives anywhere is a big no.

Izuku brings his hand back and flicks an air shot in Stain's direction, pushing the remaining tantōs back toward him. "I thought you quit using these," Izuku says, wiping his new dagger thoroughly on the inside of his Rabbit hoodie to get the blood off.

"You learn to make exceptions for people," Stain says, rushing for him again. It seems he's done with the talking now too.

Oh, fuck you.

Stain kicks off the wall in a similar motion to how Izuku did, a blur of motion. His blade strikes down and Izuku blocks it with the pipe, wincing as stinging sparks tickle at his cheeks. Stain doesn't let up in his flurry of attacks, instead aiming to overwhelm Izuku. Each *swish* and *crack* of the katana has Izuku's nerves lighting up even more. God, this is familiar. He hates this.

He hasn't needed to fight in such close combat in a long, long time. And not with swords, especially.

I wonder what made you decide to get a second katana. Never took you for a dual-blade kinda guy.

Not taking into account any quirks, Stain is stronger than Izuku. Easily. Years of experience has hardened the older vigilante's muscles and turned him into more of a villain rather than just the criminal he started out as. He has almost inhuman natural strength, and his speed is even more brilliant.

Izuku still remembers the days when he'd fawn over Stain and beg

him to tell him all his secrets. He was never really scared of him back then while being taught by him only because all of his self-preservation was thrown out the window alongside his common sense. But now he can only shudder at the idea of being with Stain like that again.

A close swipe has Izuku snapping back to reality, and he sees a flash of white coming from above. The other katana. Stain kicked his other katana into the air at just the right angle so that it would be sent straight at Izuku, which is highly impressive. There's wind coming from the entrance of the alley, so Stain must've taken that into account when calculating how much force he'd need to—

Pay attention.

Izuku frees a hand quickly and cocks back a fist, letting One for All manifest in his arm as he aims for the side of Stain's exposed torso. The blow never lands, but it wasn't meant to. The large gush of air that erupts from the motion is all he wanted; Stain is pushed back, giving Izuku the chance he needs to jump up and reach for the katana.

No sooner have his fingers wrapped around the worn red hilt than Stain appears behind him. His blade only slices the back of Izuku's hoodie, as the boy was fully prepared for a rear attack from him at some point. Izuku pivots on his heel as he narrowly avoids another slice and lunges for him, now with a katana in one hand and a pipe in the other.

Again they dance, trading heated blows and ignoring obvious feints from the other as they fight for some kind of upper ground. Stain is bigger and stronger in general, sure, but Izuku has more knowledge of him than most heroes. He stands a better chance against him only because he's had the displeasure of fighting him multiple times before.

People like Iida's brother didn't have that luxury before their final battle with Stain.

Izuku is skillfully ignoring Iida, who is still struggling to regain control over his limbs out in the street. He's getting to be quite the nuisance. Izuku needs to focus here.

I need to get Stain out of the alley and more into the light where everyone can see him. He doesn't like being seen, so if I can just expose him…

Izuku is thrown against the wall after a well-placed kick he couldn't dodge, and he drops his pipe after a moment of thought. He's too slow while wielding both weapons, so he has to go with the katana for now. The pipe is much too clunky, and Stain's been taking advantage of it.

He digs in his pockets for the last of his light bombs, trying to buy himself some time. He throws them up into the air and hits them with the flat part of the blade, right towards Stain. He attempts to hit them back, his eyesight and reflexes impeccable, but once he makes contact with them they explode in flashes of white.

Stain grunts, momentarily blinded, and Izuku comes at him from above again, the eyes being his target.

But then Stain is moving out of the way in a move quicker than lightning, leaving Izuku even more frustrated than before. Stain appears from within the leftover smoke from the light marbles and nearly beheads Izuku with a cutting jab. The boy slides underneath the man's legs and is about to slice his crotch area on the way to regaining his balance when Stain's arm goes flying back to aim another swipe at him.

It's like *Deflect* has a mind of its own. One second Izuku is preparing to meet the attack with one of his own to save his skin and the next his forearms are crossing and the shield is shimmering into life.

Stain's blade clashes against it and quickly slides off at the new barrier, and the sound has Izuku wanting to tear off his ears. It's like a fork being scraped against a glass plate.

Izuku lets the shield go and dodges the downward strike that Stain unleashes next. He jumps up and balances neatly on the thin blade, using it as a walkway to step up and kick Stain in the chin. There's a resounding *crack,* and the villain's face snaps up. Izuku wields his own katana in midair, about to go for Stain's eyes again now that he has a clear shot, but then his luck goes back to shit.

Stain moves his head to avoid it despite not exactly seeing Izuku's movements, reminding the boy that his ex-mentor does have some kind of instinctual premonition.

The blade comes within a mere centimeter of the outer layer of his eye, and Izuku is so focused on trying to just push *more* that he doesn't see the next quick slice until it's too late. Stain's katana tears through the front of Izuku's reinforced costume and leaves a long horizontal

line across his abdomen, exposing his skin to cold air.

But then the cold turns to a burning, fiery heat, and Izuku can't breathe.

He uses One for All to fall back, limbs twitching as he tries to figure out what to do next. He's getting tired fast and barely has enough time left to do much of anything.

Stain straightens up from his hunched-over form, tongue flicking out to wipe over cracked lips. "You still are so easy to predict." His hand comes up to present the blade, and dark red blood glistens as it drips down the metal.

Oh. That's why Izuku is feeling queasy. That strike did actually make it through his skin. It made it deep.

Why didn't I feel it…?

A stabbing pain has Izuku's knees nearly buckling beneath himself, seemingly at the reminder that he *should* be hurting. His breath catches in his throat again, and his skin pulls tight against his cheekbones as he launches himself forward, brain empty except for one clear, pressing thought: *get that fucking blood away from him.*

He sees Stain's muscles tense, about to jump up and over Izuku to land a finishing blow on him, but Izuku is ready for it.

Stain must realize it too, must see the look on Izuku's partially covered face, as he quickly swipes a finger to gather up all the blood droplets on his katana and attempts to bring the hand to his mouth while still jumping up.

Pull creates the connection between them immediately, though, even before he can get his palm up all the way, and they're both yanked towards each other. Stain's eyes open just a fraction more, as if surprised at the open use of what used to be Izuku's most avoided quirk yet again.

You'll never be able to hurt anyone again after I'm done, Izuku promises, and he isn't even sure if he's saying it aloud or not. The blood pounding in his ears is drowning out most of the noise, including Iida's more desperate and alarmed yells.

Izuku throws the tantō he pocketed earlier at Stain's left side, making the man move to the right just a fraction to dodge it. The shift is

made, and Izuku's opening is clear. The line from here to the finish line is fucking close, and Izuku closes the distance between them.

His blade cuts through the air, much faster than Stain's, and slices right through the blood-soaked fingers before they can reach his tongue at the same time as he yanks the last remaining katana from Stain's hand. The fingers come off like Velcro due to the force Izuku used, and for a moment both Stain and Izuku watch as the two appendages—his index and middle—disconnect from his body and go flying sideways, away from reach.

And Stain, to his credit, doesn't even flinch.

The moment is over too soon, and Izuku knows he messed up when Stain's white eyes slide back over to him with a predatory, near *excited* glint to them now.

Stain's revenge is always best served hot and immediate.

Izuku makes to move back, trying to get the hell out of the way for a chance to recuperate and check out what's wrong with his abdomen, but Stain is already upon him. He's kicked into a wall, and his head smacks hard against it. In a flash, Izuku is on the ground in a similar position to Native, black spots dancing in the corner of his vision.

And then, in a way that's almost anticlimactic, his limbs have no use anymore.

No. Fucking. Way.

"No. No. No, no, no." Izuku tries to move as if convincing himself this is all in his head and that he didn't actually get caught with his guard down. "How! How did you…"

The kick. He kicked Izuku in the abdomen to push him away, and he had sliced Izuku just before that in that area. He must've got the blood off of his own boot.

Dammit! It's such a stupid fucking way to go, such a dumb little mistake, and yet it's happening all the same! If he weren't partially numb from the remaining adrenaline, he probably would've been able to feel the pain again instead of getting used to it, and he would've been more aware of the wound.

Less than five minutes.

Stain towers over him and has one of the katanas (the one without his blood on it) poised above him, ready to strike down right over Izuku's chest. They're in the middle of the street now, out of the alleyway, and when that happened, Izuku doesn't know. Time is going in and out for him right now. Native seems to be coming back to himself as well, as Izuku can hear him screaming something from where he's still paralyzed just inside the alley.

There's too much happening, and his brain is swimming. He's too focused on the blood that's now leaking like a steady faucet from the places where Stain's fingers were connected to his hands, and it's mortifying. Izuku isn't a stranger to mangled or missing limbs, but does the blood have to be dripping all over *him* too?

He's going to become a shishkebab if he doesn't do something soon.

His fingers itch for the other katana, for anything really, but he just can't move. It's so humiliating, just sitting there. Waiting to die. He—he has to… he has to keep distracting him. There's still some time left until Native or Iida may be able to move fully. God, come on, think!

The paralyzation shouldn't last long, but he knows Stain knows it too, so obviously, he's not even going to be granted that much time—

Izuku's eyes screw shut as his senses mess with him again, sending that late pain rocketing through him as something familiar worms its way into his mind. As if on cue, there are footsteps, and the air around Izuku vibrates and expands. Another wave of déjà vu overtakes him and has Izuku questioning if he's actually already dead and is now dreaming this.

Fresh, *deliciously* scorching fire washes over Izuku like summer rain and drives Stain back before he can finish Izuku off, making him land in a crouch as he takes in the newcomer and the situation they've now found themselves in. "One after another," he hisses through closed teeth. "So many interruptions."

Oh, thank God for the blessing that is Todoroki's firepower.

But with this thought comes another, more terrifying realization. *Out of anyone who could come to help, it had to be you, Todoroki? I can't afford to let you get hurt. Please, please. Don't die here.*

"Nice fireworks," Todoroki says without looking behind him, now standing in front of Izuku and near Iida, his left side still bubbling with orange and red flames. The colors highlight his jaw and

cheekbones, bringing out his scar. “I was almost too late, Rabbit.”

The name catches him by surprise, and Izuku has to take a second to remember that he is indeed a vigilante right here and *not* a classmate. (But really, does that even matter in a situation like this?)

“Todoroki, you too?” Iida gasps. “But how’d you… and your left side —!”

“How? That should be my line. It wasn’t hard to pinpoint the location after seeing that symbol in the sky. Figured someone needed help.” Ice erupts from Todoroki at the same time as his fire and creates a slide under Native and Iida to pull them closer, away from Stain. “But don’t worry. In just a few more minutes, the pros will be here.”

No, I barely have that much time.

“Wait, be careful!” Izuku calls as Todoroki unleashes his next wave of fire and ice to get Stain farther away. “Don’t let him get any of your blood! He’ll paralyze you, and the duration of it varies!”

Todoroki blows out a chilly breath. “Explains all the blades lying around. I’ll just have to keep my distance.”

“That’s not possible with him,” Izuku counters, voice urgent so as to stop the boy from continuing on. “He’s fast, and he’ll be able to dodge most of your large-scale attacks. Guard yourself first and foremost, and—and create a layer of ice on your skin! It’ll make it harder for him to— *watch it!”*

Izuku’s warning comes too late, though. The tantō slices Todoroki’s cheek and goes straight through the window a little ways behind him. Stain is already on the move, not wanting to wait for their reunion to be over. “Do you ever stop running your mouth?” Stain says, clearly annoyed as he comes up on the side of Todoroki. “I’ll say, *Ingenium.* You have some good friends.”

Block, dammit!

A pillar of ice comes from Todoroki’s foot and gets in the way of Stain’s attack. A longer, serrated blade comes from the sky in retaliation, and Izuku sees what Stain is trying to do before Todoroki does.

“Ignore it!” He snaps, but Todoroki makes the mistake of glancing up at it for just a moment anyway, eyes narrowed. Stain doesn’t miss the

opportunity, as he jerks forward and lets his tongue flick out to swipe across the boy's cheek, towards the cut.

But then Todoroki's flames are growing back even stronger than before, forcing Stain to retreat lest he wants to get burned to a crisp. Hell, even Izuku can feel the heat and he's yards away.

"It's just like in the reports," Todoroki pants, wiping the blood off his cheek. "But you won't be killing us tonight, Hero Killer."

Izuku's arm twitches, the nerves beneath the skin coming back to life. *Just a little longer.*

Now he has two clocks inside his head. One for his adrenaline run out, and the other for how long he has exactly until the paralyzation wears off.

Movement catches his eye, and Izuku sees Native squirming in the corner of his vision. He's still not able to fully move, though. Izuku bets he has another four minutes left at least.

"You boys need to leave and go somewhere safe," the hero says, voice high pitched due to pain. "R-Rabbit, you need to—"

"I can't do anything yet," Izuku says. "Todoroki, keep him distracted. Give me just a minute and I'll be up again to help. I'm faster, so don't try anything up close until I can—"

It's Iida who interrupts next. "Both of you, just stop it…" His teeth are clenched as he continues, and he sounds like he's on the verge of crying. "I inherited my brother's name. *I* have to do this. He's mine to —"

"What did I say about shutting up?" Izuku hisses. "Stop with that bullshit. This isn't the time!"

"Inherited? That's weird." Todoroki throws out a hand and produces a large glacier in front of him, blocking Stain from view. "Because the Ingenium I know never talked like that. Guess your family's *also* got a dark side to it."

Ten seconds and Izuku will be free. His eyes are glued to the glacier, waiting.

In less than three seconds, the ice is being cut up into smaller pieces like it's a game of Fruit Ninja, and Stain's voice rings out in the

clearing. “Obstructing your vision when up against a faster opponent… poor strategy, indeed.”

“You’d like to think so,” Todoroki mutters.

Izuku feels the villain’s quirk high in the sky, and he tenses. “Above!”

Three blades lodge in Todoroki’s arm, and Stain is shooting toward him now with his katana outstretched, not seeming to care about his fire anymore.

Come on, come on, go!

The moment Izuku feels the connection between his brain and his limbs, he’s on his feet. He makes for the roof of the apartment complex behind him and uses the leverage to fling himself over, already having mentally calculated how fast he’d have to go off the side in order to grab Stain quick enough.

Stain sees him and twists, blade pointed towards him now, but Izuku fires an air shot to change his trajectory and ends up snagging the man by his ratty scarves from the left. He swings him around and into the wall of the building, twenty percent burning through his veins.

He goes straight through a window, sparkling glass shattering everywhere. He appears a moment later in the hole, eyes narrowed into slits as he pushes off the ledge and rushes toward Izuku again.

Izuku is busy falling and isn’t prepared for it when they meet in midair. He clumsily grabs the blade between his fingers and redirects it before it can stab right through him. Blood leaks down his forearm from his palm, and Izuku switches hands to wipe it off. He grapples with Stain, fighting for control over the sword and miserably failing.

He grabs for Stain’s scarf again and yanks him forward, giving up on snatching the sword. His hand latches onto the man’s neck now that it’s exposed, and he pushes down the nausea threatening to send bile up his throat again. *Help me,* Force.

His most ancient quirk stirs inside him, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up as the connection is secured between them. Boiling water is shot up his veins and makes coils out of his spine as Izuku pushes Bloodcurdle past its limits.

Stain spasms, back arching as he lets out a noiseless gasp. Izuku sees his chance and jumps on it. He flips the villain on his back and rights

himself so his boots are above his chest. He kicks him with both feet and screws his eyes shut at the dust and debris that explodes once Stain is slammed into the ground.

Ice comes up beneath Izuku and forms a little slide so he lands easily on his feet beside Todoroki. At the same time, Todoroki extends the ice to where Stain landed, attempting to freeze any potential movements going on inside the cloud of smoke.

“What did you do to him?”

Izuku doesn’t know what makes him answer, but he does so obediently without hesitation. “I activated his quirk for him to try and exhaust him or knock him out. Didn’t work.”

Todoroki’s perfect brows knit together. “If you push his quirk past the threshold, how did you know it wouldn’t lengthen the time that Iida and Native are still down?”

Oh, God, I love you, but you’re too fucking smart. You’re gonna kill me one day with that mind.

Izuku turns and flashes him a smile that he wishes the other could see. He winks, and it sends pain through him faster than the regret someone whose lactose intolerant feels right after they drink milk. “Experience, ya know?”

Todoroki’s cheeks redden, and Izuku assumes it’s due to the fire he emits just a second later when Stain appears from the rubble.

The dual-haired boy throws an arm out to keep Izuku behind him and then lets loose another large block of ice. He punches his fist right through the center and makes the block explode due to the sudden change of temperature when he activates his fire. *Just like at the Sports Festival.*

This gives him an idea.

“Obstructing your vision when up against a faster opponent… poor strategy, indeed.”

“You’d like to think so.”

Izuku doesn’t need to see Stain to be able to tell where he’s at. *Extract* can pinpoint the location of his quirk just fine, so as long as he has that, they’re free to try and obstruct Stain’s view of them as much as

they like.

Stain is good at guessing, but there are two of them now. It'll be harder for him to keep track of both Izuku and Todoroki, especially if he can barely see. So if Todoroki and Izuku can keep putting projectiles up in the air, if they can both switch from being the center of attention at random times, they'll be able to keep Stain at bay and get some good hits on him.

"Keep doing that, Todoroki, and try to keep your right side as cold as possible to form some protective ice on your skin like I said before!" Izuku tears off the remaining part of one of his sleeves and ties it around his middle, biting back his groan when it presses into his wound from Stain. "Just give me some rear support. Create some openings!"

Todoroki rubs at his arm. "Risky plan, but yeah. The two of us… we'll protect them."

Just over three minutes now.

Stain slices the remaining chunks of ice in the air and hits the ground, holding his sword in a loose manner. Izuku cut his fingers off on his dominant hand, so that should help them a little now that the man has got to be getting tired now. "Two on one, huh? At least you're not still naive."

No. They've learned their lessons.

And so for the next minute or so, it's a game of duck and weave mixed with cat and mouse. Todoroki will act as easy prey for Stain and then try to get him to back up or go over him by creating another obstacle or explosion with his powers. Izuku will then come up from above or on the sides to catch Stain off guard, having been able to see where he was just by feeling alone. Most of the time, Stain sees it coming and twists to get rid of Izuku entirely, but Todoroki's word doesn't just mean nothing–Izuku's friend is there right on time to interrupt Stain's move, or to at least give Izuku a boost with his fire that'll push him to safety so they can start the game again. After a few times of that, the roles are switched.

But while it wastes time, the actual damage Izuku and Todoroki is able to inflict on Stain isn't much, which is a problem. Despite being in the middle of the street, no help seems to be arriving. The sounds of battle are still loud a couple of miles away, so Izuku figures there still must be some more Nomu troubling the pros. *I hope you're okay, Gran.*

Izuku needs to get some good hits on Stain, and fast, as he only has two minutes now. He can already feel his body protesting at each movement, and the wounds he's accumulating now aren't doing him a favor. It's already hard enough to keep blood away from the villain, much less be on the offensive too.

Stain gets a little too close to Todoroki after Izuku switched roles with him for another random period of time, making Izuku curse.

Thinking fast, he does a corkscrew in the air to get some momentum and kicks at a small car that's been vandalized off to the side, and okay, yeah, that fucking *hurt.* Why did he think that was a good idea? He probably shouldn't use his legs again like that. The car flies toward Stain and Todoroki, rolling as it goes. The windows smash and the metal compacts in on itself, and the sound captures their attention instantly.

Todoroki brings up his arms and creates a thick wall of ice as a barrier, but Stain, who is only a few feet in front of him, is not that fast. He tries to leap out of the way off to the side, but the car clips him and sends him sprawling, a sickening snap sounding above the fire spreading around them.

Oh, Izuku hopes that's the sound of his ribs hopefully puncturing a vital organ. That would be great right about now.

The car comes to an abrupt halt after hitting the ice wall, and Izuku immediately goes for Stain again after seeing that Todoroki is still standing. *Gotta overwhelm him. Keep going at him.*

"Please," Iida begs from his spot on the opposite side of the street. "Stop it. I can't… I can't take it…"

Izuku is grateful that Todoroki responds first, as he's busy trying not to let Stain get the upper hand on him as they dance around each other face to face.

"If you wanna stop this, stand up! I've only got one thing to say to you now, Iida! Never forget who you *want to become!"*

The last words are shouted and edged with icy poison, and even Izuku shivers. He sucks in a breath when Stain's blade gets too close, and he has to stop himself from recoiling when some of Stain's own blood spurts on him. It's obvious the man is nearing his limits too. But it's still not enough. They need to be quicker and hit harder or else he'll just keep getting back up!

Besides, what if he ends up giving up and makes for a retreat? Izuku has seen it happen before. He knows he won't be able to catch him if he goes.

But… but just maybe. Maybe he won't end up leaving. When battles get serious like this, when heroics and morale are questioned, Stain never wants it to end on anything but his own terms.

And Izuku can use that to his advantage. Stain has trapped himself just as much as he's trapped them all.

His foot hits something sharp, and he immediately kicks up the second katana that Stain left on the ground earlier and blocks the man's next hit. He pushes him steadily back for a couple of moments, trying to be unpredictable as he aims for sore spots that Izuku knows he must have. But then the tides turn, and Stain's blows come even faster and harder than before. His agitation has always made him a more formidable opponent rather than making him more prone to messing up like it would for others.

That's what the bad kind of experience does to a person.

One nice jab and Izuku's katana is flying out of his hands, sinking into a patch of earth a few yards away.

Stain rushes forward, tongue flicking out, and Izuku's eyes widen. "Todoroki!"

The villain scoffs. "Haven't you learned anything, brat? Relying so heavily on another quirk makes you sloppy."

Instead of any ice or fire to keep Stain away, though, what comes next is a rush of air and the soft whirring of barely functional engines. Iida appears before him in the blink of an eye and brings a reinforced foot down on top of Stain's head. Izuku is pushed back just by the air force, and Stain's face goes straight into the concrete. The katana in his hand snaps in half, and Izuku watches in awe as the half blade falls right next to the other discarded one.

Izuku steadies himself and falls back as the blue-haired teen makes for another go at Stain, who's already on his feet. "It's about time, Iida! Come on!"

Another boot to the cheek by Iida, and Stain stumbles back, dazed.

He's faster than you, huh, Stain? Izuku feels a jolt of satisfaction at

that.

“It wore off,” Todoroki says, out of breath. “That quirk isn’t so great after all.”

Iida positions himself in front once Todoroki joins them again. “This had nothing to do with either of you, so I’m sorry.” He continues hurriedly before they can protest. “But that’s why I swear I won’t let you two lose any more blood for this.”

A bit too late for that, buddy, but appreciate the sentiment, Voice #5 says.

“It’s no use pretending,” Stain calls from where he’s balancing on a wall, one hand behind himself to keep upright. “A person’s true nature is not so easily changed, boy. You’re just a cancer on a hero warped society, and someone needs to correct this system. You fake heroes will just continue to breed more corruption and selfishness if it remains this way! All Might is a true hero who leads the way, and I will follow.” He points at Izuku, eyes crazed and bright. “You are worthy to lead, too, Rabbit. Which is why it will pain me to cut you *down.”*

Todoroki isn’t buying it. “What are you, a fundamentalist?”

But even as Todoroki continues talking, even as Iida cuts in to correct him, to admit to his own wrongdoings… Izuku doesn’t listen. He can’t at the moment.

Because all he’s doing is looking at Stain, and he can’t find any words. He’s… Stain is… shaking? He’s quivering. Trembling like a leaf trying to hang on to a branch during Fall. Even his words were shaky, weren’t they? Izuku was right. He *is* close to his limit.

And so is Izuku. He has a minute left, just about.

It’s this final thought, this realization, that has One for All crackling across his body once more. To win, he can’t hesitate. He can’t think anymore. He has to just *do.* With Todoroki and Iida here, he can afford to be like this.

Really, there is no other choice.

When Stain moves, Izuku is on top of it. The road beneath them is already cracked, so it’s easy for him to break it apart even more and grab a hold of a large slab of asphalt, about the length and height of a truck with about a foot width, and throw it forward with what energy

he can muster. His bones creak and protest, and he's feeling lightheaded again, but he pushes on. Blood leaks from his nose and from his palms, a late side effect of using *Force*.

"Move!" He shouts, and Iida and Todoroki don't need to be told twice.

Stain leaps further up on the wall to avoid another fatal crash, and Izuku shakes his head absentmindedly. Yeah, he's too far gone. He wants Iida dead. He won't leave until at least one body is left behind, will he? He's got that crazed look in his eye that still haunts Izuku.

He has too much to prove. Izuku has always hated that about him. Such wasted tenacity. His father would be disgusted if he saw what choice of a new mentor his son had chosen back then, he just knows it.

Iida turns to Todoroki quickly, words urgent. "Can you regulate temperatures?"

"I'm not really used to my left side yet, but why?" There's ice on Todoroki's cheek, a sure sign that he's overdoing it. None of them will last much longer.

"Izuku, dear. Are you watching that scary video again?"

Light catches Izuku's attention. The two katanas are there, silently begging for his attention. He sees his own reflection in them, and he doesn't like what he sees.

"My engine's not working! That last kick must've damaged my radiator! Just freeze my leg for me without blocking the exhaust pipes!"

Stain shouts something about interference and throws his last remaining dagger, patience now completely gone. It hits Iida right in the arm in between the two bones when he dives in front of Todoroki, protecting him from the dagger heading for his heart. A cry is wrenched from him, and it's ugly and painful.

"Well, hurry up for Mommy, 'kay? Breakfast is ready, and I made your favorite since it's your birthday! You excited?"

Izuku picks up the blades and tests the weight of each, eyes glazed over as he instinctively calculates the force they'll need between the three of them for this to work.

“Iida–”

“Just do it quickly, Todoroki!”

The air becomes chilly, and Izuku turns with his gaze on Stain.

“Oh, ‘Zuku! There’s only fifteen seconds left of it, sweetie, and you’ve seen it a dozen times already. You don’t want your food to get cold, do you?”

Fifteen… seconds left? That’s right. He has fifteen. Reality is starting to blur.

With his palm outstretched, Izuku *yanks* Stain off of the wall with *Pull* settling like a warm blanket at the pit in his stomach.

A distant Nomu’s desperate calls ring in his ears, and he steels himself. He throws the two katanas, calling out to Iida before Stain can even think to move away.

They meet eyes, and Iida seems to get what he’s saying without having to ask. With frosted air coming from his engines, he’s good for another few runs. The teen watches the blades fly with his calculated eyes and jumps up right as they pass him.

He kicks them both at the same time with a grunt, sending them along at a speed that seems faster than light itself.

They drive into Stain’s shoulders just as Izuku planned and don’t stop until they wedge themselves into the crumbling wall behind him. But they don’t go all the way through Stain’s body, so he is forced to go along for the ride as a consequence. And there he stands, pinned to the wall like an insect, or like someone who’s about to be crucified.

“Izuku? Honey, what’s with that look?”

“Todoroki, get ready to hit him one more time!” Izuku commands, struggling to keep their target in focus. “Use fire or ice, it doesn’t matter! Just stabilize yourself!”

Iida rushes over to jam the blades even further into the wall as a precaution, only just barely dodging the villain’s hands. He’s not so lucky with his feet though, as he gets pushed back far off to the side.

Todoroki covers the ground with ice to make himself go faster and lets his fire cover his arm and fist whole as he approaches from Stain’s other side.

Izuku feels One for All and *Extract's* energies boil together and combine again to form one large pool. The red lightning licks his frame and shocks him, spurring him forward. And then Stain is surrounded, just like that, on all possible sides.

Final strike.

Todoroki and Iida look to him before it happens, if only for a moment, and they all seem to reach the same conclusion at the same time, because then they're all rushing for him. Desperation and exhaustion make them hungry to win and even *hungrier* to get this over with.

They're so, so close now. Izuku is going to fall over if they don't finish this right now. He needs this. Wants it.

Thank you for saving Missy, and thank you for saving me. But please, this needs to be the last time we see each other when we're both free.

There's a lump in his throat now, and it's sliding ever so slowly down his throat and choking him. It could be blood for all he knows. It tastes like iron either way.

Boost and One for All work together now as Izuku's crutch when he pulls his fist back one last time, lungs burning and muscles aching as he stretches past his limits, counting down the clock ticking inside his mind.

Ten seconds. He can already feel the adrenaline fighting back and dragging him down.

The two katanas are lodged into the wall deep, preventing Stain from escaping. Todoroki and Iida's quick thinking has saved this whole endeavor.

White eyes bore into Izuku's—studying, analyzing, taunting, and the boy doesn't let it stop him. Can't.

Whatever it was that Stain was looking for in Izuku… he hopes he's found it. Because it's all over after this. Izuku will never let Stain be free again.

Stain's mouth moves, and Izuku can make out what he's saying clearly without having to try: *Not bad.*

The wind caresses his mask-covered cheeks, blowing back his curls underneath his hood and sending a chill over his skin. There's a

moment of doubt here, somewhere at the back of his mind, but then there's a whisper of breath around him and he steadies himself.

Don't go for the chest, Ninth.

The first voice takes him by surprise, and his breath escapes him through his teeth. He deserves it though, doesn't he? Stain does. If Izuku hits him right in the chest at the rate he's going right now… it'll kill him. Izuku's fist will go right through him. He'll shatter his entire arm and probably never be able to repair it, sure, but… Stain will be gone. Forever.

He'll only exist in every hero's nightmares. He'll only exist in the shaky letters Izuku wrote in his notebook all those nights ago.

Maybe in another universe, he would've done it. Maybe if Iida and Todoroki weren't here, maybe if he still didn't have that fear of becoming just like his father, *maybe* he would've smashed right through Akaguro Chizome.

No, not this time. He'll do something worse.

Izuku shifts. His fist is cocked, now headed for Stain's face instead, towards his inverted nose and his eyes. And he hates how sick it is. Hates the dark thoughts that are now egging him on, the blackest of shadows dancing at the edge of his vision and cheering for him to go further, to hit harder.

But he shakes them off. He's here, about to destroy his mentor's future and plans in one calculated blow, and that has to be enough.

And all he feels is relief.

It happens in a fraction of a second. That's all it takes.

Chizome feels the boys coming at him from all sides: Ingenium's bastard brother on the right, Endeavor's spawn on the opposite end, and Midoriya Izuku…

The brat is right in front of him. He's flying at him so *fast,* but

Chizome sees it in slow motion. The streetlight behind him is outlining his figure in an orange glow and casting dark shadows over his face. There's the faintest hint of crimson in the boy's emerald eyes now, matching with the lightning cracking all across his skin and suit.

And here, at this moment, Chizome can easily imagine the face of the king of the underground replacing his son's.

When he first saw Midoriya Izuku a few years ago, he knew him from somewhere. He knew it the moment the warning bells started going off in his mind, screaming at him that *this* is someone he should pay attention to.

He forgot about the hero he was attacking, forgot the warning speech he usually gives when some foolishly brave civilian tries to intervene with his work—he forgot *everything*.

He was interested. He was almost *excited*.

Because having the opportunity to train someone as unstable, as powerful, and as malleable as the shaking boy that was in front of him —someone who, in all senses, shouldn't be so focused on saving others —was something he never thought could happen.

Chizome never wanted anyone to mentor. He never cared for that sort of thing, and still kind of doesn't. But he also isn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. The world dropped Midoriya Izuku on him at the right time, and when Chizome realized who he was—realized what he *could* be—he really never had a choice in the matter.

He had to take that boy under his wing before someone else did. He knew that for a fact.

And who better to help further Chizome's own heroic goals than the son of the most anti-All Might person to exist? If he could convince *that* to come to the right side… Chizome would have already won. And looking at Rabbit now, looking at how far he's come and how much he's grown, it's clear Chizome was correct in his intuition.

He chose right.

And this is when Chizome sees it. Even behind the mask, even behind the dirt and blood smeared all around Midoriya's face, he can see it. He sees the way his eyes crease at the edges, the way his cheeks rise up and stretch around his cheekbone as he rears back his cracked fist.

Midoriya Izuku is *smiling,* isn't he? Even as he's about to probably screw up his arm even further, and even as he's flying closer to the danger that is Chizome. And Chizome just feels like *laughing* because he never could've imagined this would happen.

He never thought Midoriya would get this far so quickly. And yet he's satisfied all the same.

This is what the light of a hero is supposed to be. Not like those fakes out in the city right now.

He remembers the sheer iciness that dripped from the kid's words like poison, the way he promised him, right before slicing off Chizome's fingers, that he would *end* his violence for good. He remembers the heat and force of his attacks and that identifying intensity of his that derives from goodness and justice.

This boy is a good compromise for this world. If only Chizome had seen it sooner. If only he had somehow been able to take him from his father when he was even *younger.* Who knows what level the boy would be at now if he had? How much of this disgusting world would he have been able to change alongside Chizome?

Maybe not with the same methods, but in the same ways, sure.

The boys fly closer, the air before Chizome being scorched with impending fire and raw strength.

He meets his old ward's vicious gaze just before the blows can crash down and send him into darkness, and a smile of his own twitches at his lips.

This is indeed the same boy who tried to fight him in his pajamas all those nights ago and miserably failed. But oh, how far he's come.

And how differently things are going to be soon. Chizome can feel it in his bones. That promise of danger. That impending doom.

Something bad is about to happen. And it'll be because of this boy right here.

It'll be just as Chizome hoped. That snapping point.

You, he thinks, eyes fluttering close, the shadows enveloping him whole, *will live forever, Midoriya Izuku.*

Chapter End Notes

was listening to this song on yt , which i might've already rec'd idk. i feel like banjo and nana play this song when they're watching izuku fight as rabbit (tho probs not in situations like stain... unless)

up next? the halfway mark! chap 50! i love you all so much AHHH. might have something extra for yall for chap 50 to celebrate but who knows! it's prime testing season for me rn haha. also it's been two years since I posted the first chap and I've realized how ancient I am

(some emotional revelations will have to come to light, and a couple long-awaited discussions will FINALLY be had! believe me, this isn't the end of the hosu arc yet lmfao. i don't like happy endings)

r

live to win

Chapter Notes

> yayyy chap 50!! i got to see chris wehkamp on saturday at megacon and he was so kind and funny!! i got an autograph!! also it was my birthday a couple days ago 🤡!!
>
> anyway hope y'all enjoy 🎉🎊□!
>
> (cw: decapitation, gore—starts at the bolded "differs" and ends at bolded "blood"!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Izuku stumbles away, body smoking and broken hand cradled against his chest, he sees Stain fall out of the newly made crater in the wall.

Gravity causes the katanas, which are still stuck in the cracked concrete, to slice right through his shoulders. He falls like paper peeling off a sticky surface and lands with a resounding thud on the dirty ground, unconscious.

It's music to Izuku's ears.

"We did it," Todoroki says breathlessly, and he doesn't even sound like he believes it.

Iida is doubled over, hands on his knees. He nods a few times and then lets out something between a laugh and a sob. "He… he's gone."

"He's not dead," Izuku says, facing away and already heading for the nearest alleyway. He has to go before the heroes get here. He doesn't have much strength left. The adrenaline is already gone, and now he feels like he needs to sleep for about twenty years. Maybe he'll get lucky and his sickness will get him during that time. "But he will be if he doesn't receive medical attention soon."

Izuku hit him right in the face. He felt the bones creak and snap at the force of his punch, so he knows there's a possibility of brain damage or something of the sort. And from the previous blows they inflicted upon Stain, lung puncture could be possible too if he wakes up and moves.

But at that point it won't be Izuku's fault.

His own ribs on his left side are on fire now, with Stain's last words to him feeling as though they've been branded onto his skin with hot iron, and Izuku hates how it's familiar. Hates how he liked the praise, accepted it, needed it, wanted it. He hates how he can physically feel his own heart thumping inside his chest, banging against his bones to get out, to leave, to escape.

"Hey, where are you—"

Izuku can't even hear the rest of Todoroki's question. The world is a swimming pool all around him, and his ears feel like they're stuffed with cotton. The air rushes out of him all at once, his blood going with it down his abdomen, and it's too much. His body is sticky and hot all over, dark with his fluids and the grime from fighting.

He trips over a piece of asphalt and nearly crashes right through the window of a flower shop. He instead falls against a metal trash can and ends up on his side, with stars dancing in his vision once his cheek hits the wet ground. Fuck. His body isn't cooperating.

He has to leave, but he can't. Is he paralyzed? No. No, Stain is still unconscious, so there's no way he managed to get his blood. But still, he's gasping silently now, trying to drag in breaths that won't come to him. His eyes slide shut, and he forces himself to just *breathe* .

He didn't die during the fight against Stain, so he sure as shit won't die after it. That would just be pathetic. Dragon Lady would laugh at him. Father would be… he'd…

Why is he even thinking about him right now? Why does *he* matter?

Now that the adrenaline and fight is over, so is Izuku's capability to even think straight.

A rush of air hits him in the face, and his eyelids are pushed up so he can see Todoroki's panicked face peering down at him. And maybe this isn't the best time to think this, but *god* he's beautiful, isn't he? Even when he's all scratched up and smoking from his left side, Izuku's friend is just stunning.

"You need to stay awake," Todoroki says, a note of urgency in his voice that's only just barely hidden. Izuku gives him an A for effort, though. "Rabbit, can you hear me?"

Izuku bats his friend's arm away with his less injured hand, teeth gritted. *Let me get up by myself. You can't aid a criminal, Todoroki. Dummy.*

"Them first," is what comes out instead, the words wobbly. "Treat Native."

"Iida is helping him. I need to treat *you,"* Todoroki counters, surprisingly firm. When Izuku gives him a *look,* the boy just shakes his head. "Let me help you," he rephrases. "You—you got hit in the stomach, right? I need to see how bad it is."

Todoroki's brows are furrowed in concentration. His heterochromatic eyes shine with some unclear emotion, and he seems equally as out of breath. It's almost comforting.

The moment stretches on for a private eternity where they both hold the other's gaze captive, refusing to shatter the tension building and building while Todoroki waits for his go ahead, neither of them ready to back down.

And the tension would've kept on building, really, had another wave of pain not caused Izuku to cry out and lie back down on the asphalt. Shit. He's running out of time. He won't be able to make it out before he gets caught.

'Zawa is gonna kill me.

There's a vibration in his mind, and voice number seven speaks for the first time in a while. *I'd worry more about Sorahiko, kiddo. But you did good. Let your friends help.*

I'm gonna get them in trouble.

There's a negative hum. *They'll be fine.*

After a few moments of hesitation where he wrestles with his own thoughts and feelings to come up with a decision, Izuku finally looks away from Todoroki and moves his bloodied arm out of the way of his stomach, a clear invitation.

Todoroki takes a sharp inhale. "Thank you."

Izuku grits his teeth, trying to focus on breathing in through his nose to keep his noises down.

Careful fingers move his jacket to the side and lift up his undershirt, which is now matted with dark blood. Todoroki's hands hover over the wound, the heat of his palms sending goosebumps over Izuku's skin as he gets closer.

Antiseptic is taken out of a utility belt, and the blood that's crusting up around the slice is gently wiped away. Soft hands brush against Izuku, and the boy turns his face to the side to watch Iida and Native help each other.

He's never actually done this before. Willingly let someone take a look at his injuries, he means. Even with Aizawa, Izuku has never let him this close. Not when he has a wound like *this,* to be more specific . Whenever he got injured on patrol to this degree, which was a rare occurrence, to be fair, Izuku would either hide it or head out by himself early to take care of it. It's not about trust, really. Maybe it's about pride. Maybe it's fear.

Even the Doctor at the club was never allowed to see him like this. Izuku only went to him for medicine for a broken bone or to help him fix his stitches—and that was only when he was still learning and didn't know how to do them correctly.

There have only been a couple times where another member of the Club has taken him to see the Doc against his will to take care of something serious.

And so here, with Todoroki seeing more of Izuku, both emotionally and physically, than most people out there… It's weird. Not quite bad. But just unusual.

Actually. Maybe it is a trust thing.

Maybe he's allowing this because he can see it in Todoroki's eyes. The intensity. The genuineness. The determined gleam mixed with desperation.

Izuku used to see all those things in his own eyes on the daily. But nowadays he's seeing it less and less.

"Your body," Todoroki says, head tipped to the side. "It's… it's trying to sew itself back up. Is that your quirk?"

Izuku doesn't have to look to know what he's talking about. When he gets injured like this, his regeneration can't possibly keep up. His body will go into overdrive trying to fix it, but it can't, so all you can see is

the skin trying to patch itself together but miserably failing.

It's interesting to see, if not a little horrific. It doesn't feel nice, either.

"Yeah, part of it," he grunts out.

Todoroki's warm hands are on him, and Izuku can't help but notice how only one palm feels calloused. His left one. They're like small little blisters, similar to the kind Kacchan gets on his own hands after using Explosion for too long.

Izuku wonders briefly if it hurts him.

Todoroki's quiet cursing is what brings him out of his thoughts. "It—it's deep. We need a healing hero here. I—I can't really do much with this. We have to get you to—"

He cuts himself off.

"Huh?" Izuku twists his neck, trying to force himself up on his elbow. "What's—"

The world tilts on its axis, the general flow of the universe having been thrown off course inside Izuku's mind.

Todoroki is staring at his wound. Not the slice. No, of course not. His old one. The bullet wound. The golf ball shaped one that's been a part of Izuku's abdomen for a long, long time now. Sometimes even Izuku forgets it's there until the scarred tissue starts to itch when it's particularly dry outside.

He doesn't know why Todoroki has this certain look on his face until he remembers makeup and towels and singing in showers in a locker room, and then he realizes just how much he fucked up.

Izuku doesn't say a word. He keeps his eyes on Todoroki like a deer in headlights. What's the possibility that Todoroki forgot his classmate has a scar exactly like the one he's seeing right now?

"Midoriya," he whispers, and it's disbelieving. Like he's in awe.

Close to zero then, he figures.

Shit.

Not knowing what else to do, Izuku reaches down with his good hand and takes Todoroki's, bringing it back to where his scar is and placing

it over it, as if hiding it from sight. “I know. Just—later. Later, I promise. Not… not now.”

The plea is there. Todoroki’s eyes slide up to his, and there’s a sky full of emotions between them that neither of them are ready to work through yet. But then Todoroki seems to understand it all without having to ask and shakily continues his work with a curt nod.

Izuku’s friend is quick. In just a couple of minutes, a bandage is wrapped around his forehead to cover up a nasty slice that Izuku didn’t even know Stain managed to give him, and his wrist and arm are given extra support. Todoroki can’t cover his entire broken hand, but the compression still helps.

Maybe having an experienced pro hero as your father pays off somewhat. You probably learned how to do all that from a young age, huh?

Todoroki leans in close to lift Izuku into a sitting position, and his face is inches from Izuku’s. Izuku’s gaze drops to Todoroki’s lips, and he shivers when his friend’s hands move to rest lightly on his shoulders. A grounding technique, Izuku remembers from a book he read a while back.

While he appreciates it, as he feels like he’s currently not here, like he’s outside his body, he still wishes Todoroki would back up a little bit. Izuku needs space. He needs to get *out of here.*

His back is now against the wall of the shop, and his head drops back. “Ya know, you’re really strong, Todoroki.”

“You’ve told me that before,” he says, now completing a quick once-over to check for any other pressing injuries on Izuku.

This makes Izuku frown as he realizes something. “You’ll need stitches for that cut on… on your—” Izuku finishes through gritted teeth when he feels another stabbing sensation go through him. “Your *cheek* . I—I can help.”

“Not with only one hand, but thanks.” Todoroki removes the contact with Izuku and looks to where the sound of fighting is growing louder. “I’m fine.”

“You’ll be surprised how many times I’ve had to stitch something up with only a few fingers.”

This captures his attention again, but before he can say anything,

Native and Iida are walking slowly over. From what Izuku can see, the pro hero does indeed have minor injuries. His leg looks a little messed up, but it seems like he can still walk for now, so that's a plus. What's worrying Izuku more is Iida's arm and shoulder.

The boy took a dagger for Todoroki, and Izuku knows from experience that a full force throw from Stain isn't anything to joke about. The villain must've hit something important.

Izuku only hopes it won't do permanent damage to Iida's nerves. The dagger itself is still in Iida's shoulder, which is both good and bad.

The heroes need to get here faster.

"Mommy, how long would it take All Might to come help us if we needed him?"

The quirks in the distance are flickering. Like candles being teased by too much wind. Izuku closes his eyes again and just prays.

He hopes Uraraka is having fun at her internship. She looked pretty happy about her pick.

"Well, he is a busy man, being number one. But I'd say not long at all, Izuku. Isn't he the fastest?"

He hopes that once he reopens his eyes, he'll be back in Gran Torino's makeshift agency, that he'll get another chance to redo everything. Wouldn't that be nice? He'd kill to have a quirk like that. Who wouldn't?

"'Course he is! He's the strongest!"

Her laugh is unexpected. "I think that's the fifth time you've said that today, sweetie, and it's still morning time."

He can hear Todoroki talking with Native and Iida, and he focuses on just the tone of their voices, not really their words.

He just needs some background noise to try and drown out everything else. Like these goddamn voices.

There should be some nice rope in one of the shops nearby, so they could use that to tie up Stain, right? It's not like he's going anywhere after the beating he just took, but you can never be too careful.

"But, Mommy?"

“Mhm?” The smell of delicious breakfast wafts through the air as they eat.

“I’m confused. Why didn’t All Might ever come to save you?”

Native kneels before Izuku and puts his hands on his knees, his breathing labored. “I may not approve of what you do, but you’re still just a kid.” His eyes rake over each of them. “You all are. And I’ll say that you three did damn well taking the Hero Killer down. I’m sorry for not being of any help.”

Izuku shakes his head while Iida and Todoroki wave him off and protest. Immediately after, the two of them go to tie up Stain with some of Native’s hero grade capture wire and the rope Izuku was thinking about.

The pro stays beside Izuku, filling him in on how Stain managed to get the best of him and what he was doing before the ambush. He’s either trying to keep Izuku awake or calm some of his own nerves down—or both. Izuku wouldn’t blame him. Native almost died against one of the scariest villains alive, which is, yeah, pretty unforgettable.

She smiles and tips her head. Izuku watches condensation slide down her glass of orange juice.

“He keeps knives in his left boot,” Izuku says, or tries to. It comes out more like drunken rambling. “Make sure to check for them.”

Iida calls back something in affirmation. Native looks at him, now sitting up against the wall beside him. “You sure are thorough, huh? You know everything about everyone.”

That’s his job. Rabbit is supposed to know everything so nothing goes amiss.

“Oh, ‘Zuku, what would I ever need to be saved from?”

It starts with a spark, as it always does.

The fire from the evacuation and panic has spread to all around them. Izuku feels the warmth and likes the way it burns the ends of his hair. It’s not quite as nice as Todoroki’s, but Izuku knows he’s just biased.

Native grunts as he forces himself to his feet, and he helps move Izuku off to the side and away from the fire. “My coworker says the others will be here in less than a minute. You can relax now, kid.”

Even though he's a few yards away from the flames spreading to the bushes along the sidewalk, Izuku still feels as though he's inside the inferno. He wonders what it would be like to just be left here. To stay with Stain, maybe.

Obviously that would be dumb. But he just can't help but think *what if?*

His head is pounding and his vision is getting blurrier by the second. He sees yellow and orange and black, and then red.

He wonders where the red is coming from.

This is when the steady thumping starts. Something large lands on the street they're on, causing the earth to shake. He vaguely sees craters forming beneath the large feet, and he blinks a few times, wondering what trick of the mind this is now.

But then the quirks hit him all at once, and Izuku's clarity returns with his panic. He is barely fast enough to react or even *sense* it all the way before a new winged Nomu saunters right toward them, the flames licking up its sides as it crosses through the wall of fire. It doesn't cry out in pain or flinch away or anything though.

It's too focused on its mission.

It stands at ten feet tall, and that's without the red, leathery wings outstretched menacingly behind it. White teeth gleam and wide eyes lock onto Izuku's, whose mouth is now slightly open in awe.

So many quirks. God. How many do you have? Like ten?

How is it still standing? How did it even reach here without alerting the heroes? Or maybe it did. From the wounds on its body, Izuku can tell it might have already come into contact with the heroes. Does that mean it escaped, or that the heroes lost?

Izuku's head throbs at the same time as the Nomu moves. With only one flap from its large wings, the Nomu clears the distance between them.

It's only been two seconds since it landed. There's not even time to call a warning, to shout at Iida and Todoroki, who are emerging from the alley where they put Stain, to run—no, time has no mercy on them.

Native reacts first.

He's on his feet and in front of Izuku again, arms outstretched as his quirk flares up in defense. Izuku can feel it rippling like a pool of water after a butterfly's wingbeat, and it soothes his mind almost instinctively.

But it's wrong. It's comforting in all the wrong ways.

Izuku huffs at his mother, not understanding why she doesn't get what he's saying. "From the monsters!"

Native's quirk shimmers, and he pulls back an arm to drive it into the Nomu, but he hasn't even reared it back all the way before he's snatched up.

A horrifically large, disfigured hand wraps around Native's throat before anyone else can move and lifts him off the ground.

"No, *dammit!"* Iida is running from the opposite side of the road now with Todoroki by his side. The dual-haired teen's power erupts once more as a shout leaves his cracked lips, but it's no use.

It happens quickly, between one breath and the next.

The flames shoot from Todoroki's side but are still far too slow.

When Izuku looks back on this moment, he'll realize all of the details he missed before. He'll think of all the ways he could've done something. Maybe he could've used *Pull.* Maybe he could've used *Force* on Native when he was still in front of him as a last resort, just to bring out the full extent of his quirk and see if it could get the Nomu to back away.

But Izuku is trying so hard to just keep conscious that he doesn't think of any of these things. Gran said that quirk usage comes to you as it's needed. It should be instinctual in the moments where it matters. Just like how using a limb is to most.

And here? Izuku's body feels he should stay exactly how he is. Using another power would disrupt his healing and kill him, not that he cares in the heat of the moment right here.

But it's a mistake. To Izuku it'll always be one of his worst ones.

Because then the winged Nomu brings up its other hand and grabs the

top of Native's head. Long, stained talons dig into him and drag across his temples, piercing through the skin and into the skull.

With the first hand, the Nomu extends its talons and wraps them around the shoulders and arms next, cutting through Native's costume. Now it has the hero by the head and the base of his neck, causing blood to drip like a waterfall down oily skin.

Native squirms, gasping for air as his quirk is snuffed out for the last time. His wild eyes meet the boys' briefly. "Don't loo—!"

Bones creak, and, like yanking a plug out of an outlet, the Nomu pulls him apart.

"I don't see why you hate that soup so much," Hizashi says, eyes twinkling with mischief as he pokes at his husband's shoulder. "Is it all the cheese? Is that why you find it *abhorrent?"*

"Stop saying random adjectives in English, Hizashi. You know I don't know what it means."

Nemuri snickers from where she's currently flirting with some random person and glances back at them. "Yeah, don't make Shouta feel too stupid now, 'Zash. He gets self-conscious."

Hizashi's grin grows wider. "Oh, don't I know it." He turns to Yagi and Kan, who are both talking with each other about something from work. "Hey, hey, y'all shouldn't be talking about such boring stuff! We're on a break for a few days, so let's enjoy ourselves!"

"Who said I wasn't?" Kan asks, taking a swig from his beer and swiping some notifications from his phone. "Not everyone has to be loud to be having fun."

Yagi coughs up blood. "You don't have to be so direct!"

"Nah, don't worry about it, man." Hizashi winks at him and just sticks his middle finger up at Kan, only half-joking this time. "How're y'all's entrees, eh?"

While Shouta and Hizashi got different kinds of soup, the other three teachers ordered more balanced meals. They all decided to go out to eat the day before, so here they are at a nice, secluded little bar on the outskirts of the city.

It's one of Hizashi's favorite spots, and not just because of the karaoke contests. Right in front of this bar is where he officially asked Shouta out on their first date all those years ago. It's something he'll never forget.

It's a few days into the internships the kids are having, so when all of the paperwork and planning the teachers have to do gets finished, they get the rest of the time to do whatever they please.

Like go out to eat and have fun together.

"Mine is delicious," Yagi says, gesturing to his steaming plate of food. "Thank you for inviting me here, Yamada. I never even knew this place existed before tonight."

"Only 'cause you work so much! You've gotta kick it back and relax sometimes, dude." Hizashi ignores Kan's response to the question and turns back to Shouta. "Did ya want to order something else, babe? We can switch if you want."

Shouta rolls his eyes and takes the soup Hizashi offered, pushing his own bowl towards his husband. The small, near invisible grin on his face says it all, though; he's not actually too upset.

This was just karma for branching out and trying something new on the menu.

While Nemuri and Shouta have some kind of fruity drink and Kan has his beer, Hizashi and Yagi both just got soda. It seems neither of them can handle alcohol, one for medical reasons and the other for personal ones.

There's movement, and Hizashi sees Shouta swat lightly at Nemuri's hand when she tries to go for his food. "Hey! Keep your hands off the chili fries!"

"But you're not even eating them!"

"Yes, I am," Shouta defends, picking one up as if to prove his point. "Don't *touch* them."

“I’ll let you have some of my food, free of charge,” Nemuri offers with a sharky grin.

Shouta scoffs. “I’m paying for everything anyway, what would that even change?”

“Ugh, you’re always such a buzzkill.”

Hizashi watches them argue while eating some of the chili fries himself. They’re pretty good. Anything with chili is, to be fair.

And so it’s here, when Hizashi is absolutely devouring the fries and talking with the waiter, who has known him as Present Mic for a while now, that they get the text message.

It’s from Nezu, which isn’t exactly weird. He texts randomly and never has a set schedule, so Hizashi has learned not to be surprised anymore.

It’s just the content of the text that always throws him for a loop.

Embedded in the message is a live feed of a screen showing the body temperature, pulse rate, respiration rate, and the blood pressure of someone. And, okay, yeah, this is a little weird. Not *the* weirdest or most ominous text Nezu has ever sent, but it’s up there.

Just as he’s about to text back and ask who this is monitoring right now, Hizashi gets a better look at the vitals.

Temperature: 101.4° F

The number rises by a decimal even while Hizashi is looking at it, and he feels his brows furrow. That’s not dangerous, but it isn’t great.

Hizashi straightens up once he keeps reading the charts, though.

Pulse: 132 BPM

Respiration Average: 33 breaths per minute

Blood pressure: 145/95

What the hell is this? Is this person sick? Are they running a marathon and a fever at the same time?

Hizashi turns to his husband, who received the same text. “Hey, Sho, who—”

Ding.

He stops in his tracks, mouth still open. He meets Shouta's wide eyes and then glances back down to his phone with Shouta doing the same, blood turning to ice. He knows the tone of that notification. That belongs to the new software Nezu installed into their phones for them to keep track of Midoriya via the armband they gave him.

Cloying, suffocating dread overtakes Hizashi, and his heart drops to his toes. *Did he hit the panic button?*

"What's with the faces?" Nemuri asks, but Hizashi doesn't hear her.

Because now he's looking at the notification with something cold settling in his stomach. Somehow it's worse than Midoriya hitting the panic button.

Connection lost. Last location of service: City Square, Hosu.

He swipes up, and the vitals embedded in Nezu's message are lost too, with everything showing up as ***N/A.*** The pieces fall together, and Hizashi grabs hold of his husband, fingers digging into his arm. "Shouta."

"He's in Hosu," Shouta responds, voice clipped. He's already standing, picking up his jacket and gathering his belongings. "Gran Torino should be with him."

"Young Midoriya is in Hosu?" Yagi asks suddenly, standing up as well to match Shouta's movements.

Kan finishes off his beer. "What's happenin'?"

Shouta's phone rings, and Hizashi is only just able to see Tsukauchi's caller ID before the call is being accepted.

Something catches his eye, and Hizashi looks toward the television plastered on the large wall of the bar. The headline is all it takes to make Hizashi's head swim: ***Attack in Hosu City! All Nearby Heroes Report!***

Oh, God. Hizashi has never believed in simple coincidences.

He pats Shouta's arm immediately a few times to get his attention and points at the screen.

The next title flashes by. ***Rumored Sightings of Hero Killer: Stain!***

Evacuate Immediately!

Shit. Tenya, kiddo…

He's there, isn't he? Tenya went to Hosu for Manual's internship.

Nemuri puts a hand on his shoulder and watches the footage with him of the destruction happening. It's a shitshow out there. A bloodbath.

Hizashi feels the putty settling in his throat, sees the darkness on his husband and best friends' faces, and he knows they're thinking the same thing he is. They're coming up with the same conclusions.

And here, a couple hours away from the events going on in Hosu, Hizashi has never felt more helpless in his life.

Have you ever played with dolls growing up? Maybe it was a Barbie doll or one of those off-brand ones your mother had to buy because the other ones were too expensive?

Or maybe you were more of an animal person and had those build-it-yourself figurines of your favorite breed of cat or dog.

Whatever it was, do you remember what it was like when that doll eventually broke? When something went wrong? When you accidentally played a *little* too rough with it?

Izuku does.

He was seven years old. He had an old figurine of some random hero that Kuro brought to him from the outside. He wasn't allowed many toys at that age, so he treasured it.

He played with it a lot, alone in his room and away from the all knowing eyes of his father. He would play with it at night when he was supposed to be sleeping or during the day whenever Father had his treatments and was bedridden.

It was his favorite thing, next to the radio he hid along with it under

his bed.

He loved it, right up until Tomura—no, *Shigaraki* got angry at him one day, snatched the doll from his grip, and popped the head clean off.

When Izuku began to cry, already emotionally vulnerable due to being punished by Father earlier that day, Shigaraki disintegrated the body of the hero figurine. He gathered up the ashes and pushed them into Izuku's face as he scratched at his own neck and skin, laughing with a kind of mania that sickens Izuku even to this day.

This continued for a couple minutes until Kuro found them and told Shigaraki to go to his room—not that he would listen. The teenager knew that Kuro didn't have the right to punish or order him around as he did Izuku.

Kuro tried to comfort Izuku as best he could, but at that point in time it just wasn't possible. Izuku was sobbing as he stared at the ashes of his hero's body, wondering what he did this time to make Shigaraki so upset with him.

But then the doll's head followed too, a delayed reaction of Decay, and Izuku only cried harder. Kuro had to carry him to his room so Father wouldn't make a show out of his reaction.

Native's head does not disintegrate, though. That's where this time **differs**. It rips off his body cleanly in one easy pull, flesh tearing and tendons snapping, blood spurting out in a dizzying arc and painting the space before Izuku red.

The Nomu stares at it, as if surprised at what happened. But then it drops the head in disgust, and what happens next is not like in the cartoons. The head does not bounce high up in the air or roll a whole street away, no.

It lands with a moist thud on the concrete of the road. It moves for only a second before sitting still, and Izuku has a front row seat to it all.

Native's face stares right back at Izuku. His features are paralyzed with fear, his eyes wide open in terror. It's a look that'll forever be frozen on him now.

Oh, Izuku thinks, mind fuzzy.

The silence afterwards rings out in the street, broken only by the

crackling of the flames and the Nomu's breathing.

Iida falls back to his knees with his mouth agape, armor clanging, and Todoroki simply stares. He shakes, vomits off to the side, and Izuku can't feel or think.

He… failed. That's what just happened. Native is… gone.

Stain won.

This fact causes Izuku's eyes to blur. He drags his gaze up to stare at the Nomu, and there's a ping there. A little kindling of familiarity. Izuku knows those wings. Knows those goddamned eyes.

But he can't feel anything but the dull burning settling under his skin now, and his brain is barely working, so he doesn't think any more of it.

Todoroki heaves up the rest of whatever is in his stomach while Izuku shifts and begins crawling forward. The cracked debris and asphalt dig into his palms and scrape at his wounds, but he keeps moving. He grabs Native's head with careful, bloody hands, breaths quivering. He tries to shift himself up but ends up slipping in the pool of crimson and falling back down. Streams of it run down his skin and soak into his bandages, and he bites his lips so hard in concentration that his own blood drips down to join Native's.

"No, no, no, no." Izuku is mumbling now, repeating himself and barely making sense. None of this makes sense. "You… you…"

You're not supposed to die here. That wasn't what was planned. What did I do wrong? It was supposed to be Stain. Or me. It was going for me. Why did you step in front of me? Why didn't I move faster?

The Nomu kicks the rest of the body away from it, shaking its limb as if to get rid of the dirty residue. Native's body lands in a flurry of limp limbs beside Izuku, and he stares at it. His arms move on their own accord, trying to move the head to where the body is. He can put it back where it's supposed to be on the open socket. Because maybe, just maybe, if he puts it back and screws it on like those Barbie dolls, it'll be okay. It'll just be a little mishap. They can fix it. They can sew him back together! He won't be dead. Native won't have to be dead.

But the head slips out of his hands multiple times, and his chest constricts each time it happens. God, please, he's so close. He just—he needs to put it back on correctly and—

The whole earth shakes as the Nomu approaches slowly from behind Izuku (and when did that happen? Wasn't it in front of him?). Its heavy, hot breaths sound from high above, but Izuku still doesn't pay it any mind. Not yet. Not yet because he's still looking at Native, at what *was* Native, maybe, and all he can see are the faces of those heroes he saw in the basement that day after Father's pets had their fun with them. All he can see are parted lips, milky eyes, disfigured bodies and minds, and so, so much **blood.**

Long claws dig into the concrete when they move to wrap around Izuku's torso. He's lifted up, and it's almost gentle. But the talons cut sharply into his sides, reigniting the pain from his stomach wound, and it's just like the time in his dreams. Maybe his mind was warning him this is where he'd end up.

Again, the world slows. He feels the combined heat and ice of Todoroki as the boy comes back to himself and attempts to stop the Nomu from taking him. He shouts his name— *Midoriya,* not Rabbit, and Izuku knows Iida is there, knows Iida heard it by his little gasp in between his uneven breathing as he prepares to rush the Nomu alongside Todoroki.

Why are they still trying to save him? Did they not just see what happened to Native because of him?

The Nomu is off, wings beating and leaving mini hurricanes in its wake. Izuku is being taken to the stars twinkling high overhead, and Todoroki lets out a raw sort of sound as Izuku is snatched right from under him, like a carpet being yanked out from under a coffee table.

Izuku knows why the Nomu targeted him but won't admit it until this is all done for. If there even is a *done* here.

As they soar, Izuku is limp. He's held beneath the Nomu and gets to see the destruction happening far below as he rises higher and higher. In just a few seconds, it gets even harder for him to breathe. Air escapes him in small clouds of white, dissipating near instantaneously.

The darkness is a blur, and wind whips at his face harshly, like a continuous slap. Something wet is forced from his eyes but he can't exactly feel what it is. The liquids drip away into the wind, and he bets it's blood.

When they're high enough, the Nomu pauses for a moment, hanging in the air, and brings Izuku up to look at him square in the face. And

it's a scary, scary thing. Izuku stares directly into its eyes, and he can't even feel scared. Why would he? Right here, this monster? It's him. And he knows more than anyone else the easiest ways to destroy himself.

This could've been him. Just like the one at the USJ.

What happens next is almost customary. There is no other choice here. He should've done this during the attack on UA, but he didn't. He was a coward. He never really understood it then, but he thinks he gets it now. His purpose in relation to his father's crimes.

You're too strong, he thinks, motionless in the Nomu's tight hold. *It's almost ridiculous.*

Slowly, his shaking hands—the only parts of his body not stuck by his side—move up. His quirks pause in their work, like the moment before you step off the edge of a precipice. Like the quirks are waiting for something amazing amidst the terror.

I can't even move an inch of my body in your hold. You… you shouldn't be allowed to exist anymore. I look at you and all I can see is his self-righteous face. It's making me sick.

Moonlight shines on scarred skin, revealing the patchwork job All for One and his doctor must've done to give this Nomu a body. And this close to it, Izuku can actually *hear* the pumping of its blood. He can hear its makeshift organs trying to function, the result of too many quirks being forced inside one artificial body.

I'm so sorry. I'm going to kill you.

The Nomu must sense what he's about to do, but it doesn't move. It doesn't counter or attack him or rip his head off, no. It's almost like it *lets* him do what he does next.

It could tear Izuku apart right now, just like Native. But it doesn't. It's… it's…

Izuku's hands light up, red and black tendrils escaping from the indents in the center of his palms to wreathe around his and the Nomu's arms. He closes his eyes as both of his hands reach the skin of the limb the Nomu is holding him with, and he feels it. That jolt of electricity. The boiling water racing down his back and the liquid fire being injected into his bloodstreams.

Extract's chalice overflows, flooding his mind with faux euphoria and desperation, and Izuku searches.

It's funny how even after years of not using this quirk fully, it's all still so instinctive to him.

This time, though, his mind is completely silent. The voices are gone, and so are his doubts. This may also be because he can't even register the pain yet, but still.

All of the quirks the Nomu has—they've all been rolled into one, it seems like. They were forged into one to make it easier for the Nomu to handle, which is good but also disadvantageous. Izuku can recognize the feel of only a couple of them: a mutant quirk, probably one that allows for the controlling of the wings, and a mild regeneration quirk.

And that… that has to be okay. It'll have to be enough. He can work with that.

Izuku tightens his grip, letting *Extract* form the connection between them, and takes.

His vision goes white, and for a moment there he thinks he's actually stepped in front of the pearly gates (and isn't that confusing; he thought he'd be traveling down), but then the Nomu screeches and he's brought back to life. He's still conscious, and this thought sparks a bit of pride somewhere inside him, somewhere in his mind, because this is the first time he's stolen a quirk and not passed out for ten straight hours.

He hopes his shitty father is proud.

The talons release him, but the transfer is already complete. He only needs a second or two, and the Nomu gave him plenty of spare time. He falls freely through the sky, hands now completely numb, and this has happened so many times before that it's not even funny anymore.

Now, if Izuku dies like this, staring at the stars, it would be okay. He wouldn't be too upset.

The Nomu starts to fall too as it loses its mutant quirk factor that allows for its wings to be used as extensions. With the wings now deadweight, the Nomu can't fly.

It's just the same as Izuku.

And since it doesn't look like it was finished or complete before being sent out tonight anyway, Izuku is willing to guess that the quirks inside it were the only things holding it together. They were acting as the Nomu's fuel and glue. So now… now that they're gone…

The Nomu is splitting apart at the seams, and Izuku feels like he is too. He can hear its metallic screeching starting up again, and it hurts to listen to. He feels the vibration in his chest.

Its eyes meet his while they fall. The Nomu is catching up to him rather quickly due to its weight, and its entire body is folding in on itself. When its skin starts to fall apart and shred, it reaches for Izuku with an outstretched claw seemingly as a last resort. It's flailing and writhing around, the sound of its wings flapping uselessly in the wind drowning out everything else.

It's scared.

The Nomu makes that shrill sound again from deep within its throat, and Izuku watches as it dies. He watches as the creature becomes unable to sustain itself anymore without its foundation, without its quirks.

And he watches as it tears itself apart like a star that's past due.

The Nomu falls right past him, dropping like a rock in a stream, and Izuku can hear the exact moment it hits the ground hard, as its calls cut off abruptly.

Oh, God. It all started so fast and ended even faster.

There are anguished yells coming from below, and Izuku can only vaguely sense all of the heroes arriving on scene now. Time is relative to Izuku now, so it could easily be an hour or only a few seconds before Endeavor manages to catch him before he meets the same fate as the Nomu, he wouldn't know.

He feels Gran somewhere in the crowds, which causes him to relax at least a little. He's glad the man isn't dead. This was the last of the Nomu, right? There were… six of them? That sounds correct.

It's over. They lost, *Izuku* lost, but it's all over.

He feels his friends running over but before they can reach him they're being ushered away, probably to an ambulance. For that, Izuku is grateful.

He's spasming in the tight hold of Todoroki Enji, his body buzzing with energy from the aftermath of stealing a quirk. Izuku smells ash and sweat and gasoline, and it again reminds him of Kacchan. Geez, he wants to see Kacchan right now. He just wants… he wants a hug or something. Anything. Even a soft look or a smile from his friend and Izuku would probably bounce right back from this purgatory state.

"Rabbit!" is probably what Endeavor is shouting right now, but Izuku can't exactly hear it.

His head tips to the side, his sanity leaving him slowly as his body adapts to a mutated quirk he should probably *not* have, and then he suddenly sees it.

Past the heroes staring at him with wide eyes. Past his friends. Past the crime scene. Past the… the Nomu's twitching and smoking body…

In the middle of it all, a boy that Izuku hasn't seen in months watches him. Red, leathery wings are tucked behind large shoulders. Glistening, iridescent tears slip down red cheeks, and a calloused hand comes up to cover a quivering mouth.

Izuku's lips part, and his blood escapes him in a waterfall again.

Endeavor is saying something to him again, but it's muted, like everything has a film over it. A large, warm hand grabs hold of his chin and moves his face up so he's staring at Endeavor, so the man can check his eyes just like how Todoroki did.

But he just can't breathe anymore. He can't even respond to tell the flame hero what's wrong, not that it matters.

Because how is Izuku supposed to tell him what he's seeing? Without losing himself for good?

Another man-made monster has just been added to the long list of his regrets. The poor Nomu—no, it's *Tsubasa,* it's just as Izuku thought, *God* —will have to follow him around for the rest of his life, just like the others. Just like the other quirks that Izuku has taken.

And from the way red wings come up to fold around the face and body of Izuku's old bully, almost like a hug, it's obvious he knows it too.

Chapter End Notes

right nomu izuku!!! (wow have I waited a LONG fucking time to say that 🤦 a whole two years wtf)

this was an interesting chapter to write. definitely felt more freeing than all the other ones :D

I've been listening to this song on yt :(kinda makes me think of izuku learning how to slowly love things again and trust. i like to think inko would be the one encouraging him to keep living in some of the lyrics

o

lessons to be taught

Chapter Notes

this is the beginning of Act III :)

big thx to everyone on the discord server and everyone on tiktok!! y'all inspire me to keep doing this ❤

(cw: character death, potential child death)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sorahiko stares down at the twitching Nomu by his feet. Curved, jagged teeth pop off smoking gums like buttons on a fabric that's been stretched too thin. They bounce and clatter away, and Sorahiko tracks them with his eyes until they disappear into the darkness.

"Eesh," he mutters, shaking his head and using his boot to lift up what remains of the Nomu's face. "You really are falling apart, aren't ya? Not a pretty sight to see."

He turns away, leaving the quickly decaying creature to the other heroes on the scene. If he held more empathy for these things, maybe he'd feel a little bit upset by how brutal the Nomu is now meeting its end, but as it stands, Sorahiko really couldn't care less about their feelings at all.

If they even have feelings, which he doubts.

Taking just a moment to look at everything around him, he decides that everything has ultimately gone to shit. The whole city is in shambles, and with what occurred tonight, things won't be getting better anytime soon, he knows.

This is just like how it used to be, back when there were no such things as a *Symbol of Peace* or a *Pillar of Hope*. Back when there wasn't even a strong system of heroes.

After this incident, criminals will only become more aggressive and daring than ever before.

All of the stuff that he and Nana worked to fix… it'll all slowly start going down the drain, and Sorahiko can't let that happen.

He can't continue to lie in wait anymore.

There were six Nomu in total, and even one proved to be a hell of a lot of trouble for Sorahiko, which is a problem. Endeavor, even with all of his firepower, was getting a little overwhelmed back there.

So if more of these creatures come out in the future to attack again, in a time when they'll probably be even stronger, even more intelligent, who knows what level of destruction they'll bring about then. They have to nip this in the bud. *Now.* Before things worsen.

He guesses it was a good time to come out of retirement after all.

The very dead, *human* body of a pro hero he's not familiar with lying in the middle of the road is proof of that. Sorahiko grimaces, nose wrinkling as the smell of death hits his nose already. It looks to have been a quick end, judging by how the only major injury to the body is the missing head.

And where is the head? Sorahiko doesn't see it yet. The Nomu didn't eat it, did it?

"Sir, he–he's over… he's…" A boy with dark blue hair struggles to properly tell Sorahiko what he's thinking. His suit of armor, which must have been previously white and pristine, is splattered with blood that's still dripping down the polished material as he walks over to the pro hero. "The Hero Killer, sir. In the alley. And… Native. He…"

Iida Tenya, right? That's who this is. Sorahiko remembers his name from the Sports Festival. He fought against Midoriya during the final rounds and was pretty damn close to beating him. *And that last name of yours… how weird of you to be here now, kid.*

Before he can respond or do much of anything, two medics are darting forward to block Iida and direct him over to the ambulance that's rounding the corner. It casts the street in bright shades of blue and red, and Sorahiko simply squints and walks to where Iida was pointing.

Stepping inside the dark alleyway, Sorahiko is greeted with Stain tied up and leaning against the brick wall, unconscious. He looks like he's seen better days, and Sorahiko can't help but feel a little satisfied despite everything else. At least one good thing came out of tonight.

He studies Stain briefly before glancing over to his right, locking eyes with the missing head he was searching for. It must've rolled here

after the Nomu took off with Midoriya.

What a damn shame. You looked like you had plenty of years left, kid.

He turns away to allow the other heroes to take care of the remains properly, cape swishing in the night air. While he knows the boy was a pro hero and was surely aware of the risks associated with his job, Sorahiko can't help but sigh. His death was a sacrifice that should never have been needed.

Iida and Endeavor's son are being tended to at the back of the ambulance, and Sorahiko spots blankets being quickly offered to them. *For shock more than it is for the cold,* he thinks as he makes his way over to the number two hero.

It's obvious he's the one in charge here now.

"We got the last of those bastards," Endeavor says, speaking into his phone. "Don't let your guard down over there, Burnin'. The last thing we need is for something to happen in our city while the heroes are occupied in this area."

"Got it, sir!"

Sorahiko waits despite not feeling particularly patient. He has to figure out how to approach this correctly. One wrong move or word and things will all go even more downhill from here.

Because Todoroki Enji is still holding Rabbit ever so carefully with one large arm as he gives orders to the other heroes, and while it doesn't seem possessive it also doesn't look like he's doing it to be protective either.

Midoriya's mask is still partially on, which is more than what Sorahiko expected. He was already preparing for an impromptu reveal, in all honesty. That was the only reason he didn't rush to his ward's side immediately after he was caught—there'd be no point in getting them *both* in trouble.

Why haven't you taken the chance yet, Endeavor? You're well known for unmasking pesky vigilantes the moment you get your hands on 'em.

"Todoroki," Sorahiko says, just to get his attention. He is kind of short, after all.

Endeavor looks down and grunts at him in a sort-of respectful way,

expression unreadable. “What is it?” He sounds slightly annoyed.

“This boy is injured pretty badly,” he starts, nodding at Midoriya and forcing his voice to stay disinterested, cool, and unbothered. “I can take him to the nearest hospital. I’m no longer needed here now that the last Nomu is taken care of, and you’ll no doubt be forced to stay for a while ‘cause of the press, so I’ve got him from here.”

Sorahiko honestly doesn’t care who does it out of the two of them, but all he knows is that Rabbit needs medical attention, the kind that the medics here and the ambulance won’t be able to provide him. After getting a better look at the boy, at how rough he looks, Sorahiko has come to the conclusion that they need someone to get him to a hospital as soon as possible, threat of exposure be damned. Sorahiko would rather the boy be in prison for a while than be dead. Toshinori would agree too, he hopes.

Besides, prison at least means Midoriya would have a chance to escape. You can’t escape death.

“We don’t know what’s wrong with him,” Sorahiko continues, walking even closer. “We shouldn’t take chances.”

He might be dying, or he could just be in shock. Sorahiko is leaning more towards the first one, though.

For a few moments, Endeavor just stares. He contemplates, his quirk flickering a little by his abdomen as he fights to control his flames. He must’ve turned them down a little in the best interest of the vigilante he’s currently carrying. The fact that it’s raining now might also be a contributor.

The number two hero must know he can just say no. He wouldn’t even need a reason. Endeavor could simply refuse to hand Rabbit over, and Sorahiko wouldn’t be able to do much about it. He could unmask the boy immediately, too.

It’s just what he will decide here that’s the question. In the wake of all this destruction, will he prioritize the reveal of the vigilante, or will he prioritize the situation at hand?

The fact Todoroki bothered to catch Rabbit before he could fall to his death is surprising in itself—not that Sorahiko would’ve let his ward die. He would’ve caught him had Endeavor not made it there first.

Sorahiko holds the flame hero’s gaze, trying to look more annoyed by

the man's hesitation rather than by the vigilante's *stupidity* in front of him, which is becoming more and more apparent by the second as Sorahiko stands there and takes in the state of the kid's body.

While he's not exactly blaming Midoriya, he knows damn well some of this could have been avoided. According to what he's found on him and been told by Toshinori, the boy plays with fire a little too much and escapes with only a few mild burns every time. One day, though, things will catch up to him. One day, he's going to have to lay in the bed he made for himself.

Tonight may just be that day.

A dark streak of blood comes from the top of Midoriya's head and runs down his mask, hitting the concrete down by Sorahiko's shoe without a sound.

Again he is reminded that Midoriya Izuku never fucking learns. He's going to have to fix that. If Toshinori won't teach his successor how to listen for once, Sorahiko will do it himself, even if he has to use old school methods.

Todoroki snaps him out of his daze when he speaks, voice suspiciously quiet and even. "I have to tend to my son anyway, so do what you like. I don't really care what happens to him next." His striking blue eyes flash in the light, and if Sorahiko hadn't already faced down the worst of humanity before and won, he might've shivered. "I trust he'll pay for his failures soon." At these words, Endeavor looks down at Rabbit with something dark and complicated flashing across his expression. "This will be the very last time I allow this rat to roam free."

Endeavor doesn't give him much of a warning before bending low and practically dropping the boy on top of him. Sorahiko grunts at the sudden weight, having to take a few steps back to regain his balance once he gets a good hold on him. *Sheesh, you're heavier than you look, kid. What is Toshi feeding ya?*

He straightens up, eyes narrowing. "I'd expect nothing less from you," he says, dipping his head in acknowledgement before bunching his muscles to leave.

Todoroki nods as well, but he's already on his way to where Stain and the two boys are.

Sorahiko knows a shortcut to the nearest hero-centric hospital, so he

focuses on trying to make it to the rooftops to minimize travel time. He has to readjust his grip several times and put more effort into his quirk to keep them from slipping while going up the nearest cracked wall, because *damn* he's heavy.

The hero is not going to admit that he's just very tiny.

He thinks back to what Endeavor said, to the look on his face, and his lips pull into a thin line. His gruff yet soft words almost sounded like a thank you. Like he was *thanking* Rabbit for what he did—for helping take care of Stain and for being there beside his son.

Native's life ended in a flash, and it appears that was the reality check that Endeavor needed in that moment. The stakes were high, and it's a miracle the kids weren't hurt any worse than they are. Teamwork made that possible, Sorahiko is sure.

Even for someone like Endeavor, denying someone's role in taking down a villain as dangerous as the Hero Killer just because they're a vigilante would just be too much. It would be downright stupid.

Endeavor probably recognized what Rabbit did, what they all did, and decided to spare him just this once. And yes, Sorahiko will use the term *spare* because there's absolutely no way Endeavor hasn't already come to terms with the fact that there's still a high chance Rabbit will get out of this one and escape.

In fact, he probably already considers it fact. Which means that Endeavor just let this perfect opportunity slip away from him.

Willingly.

Perhaps there's more to you than you let people see, Todoroki Enji.

If Sorahiko does this right, he can play it off like he simply lost the vigilante on the way here. Maybe he woke up miraculously.

He can take *Midoriya Izuku* to the hospital, and since he's a minor no one outside of his guardians or the hospital staff would be able to access the records of the visit. No one would be able to make the connections.

That sounds like the best plan as of right now. Before they arrive at the hospital, Sorahiko will take off the boy's mask someplace remote and make it seem like he was just an intern who happened to get caught up in the stampede.

The boy's body twitches at random times as Sorahiko climbs, most likely a response from overuse of his quirks. The faintest red sparks come from his hands, and Sorahiko pointedly ignores it for now.

They reach the top, and Sorahiko glances down to see Endeavor embracing his son tightly, who—though not looking pleased—isn't even attempting to push him away. Iida is on the phone with someone, head down, and Native's body is being covered up by a thick white sheet. Just in time, a black armored vehicle arrives to transport Stain to what will probably be a reinforced medical center for villains.

Sorahiko raises a brow at the unconscious vigilante he's holding. *You're lucky they ain't putting you in that thing with him, boy.*

He turns to leave for the hospital, shooting through the night with the added help of his quirk, and he can feel Endeavor watching them leave.

The man's eyes follow Sorahiko all the way.

Toshinori has never seen Midoriya Izuku look so young before.

At school, during training, and, hell, even during their lunches together, Midoriya never lets himself be or act his age. He's always been too mature, he's always looked too haunted and spoken too wisely on serious occasions. He's always been… *not* Midoriya.

And it's a weird thing to say. Toshinori can recognize that. Just because he has some preconception of what Midoriya, a fifteen year old child with a very powerful mind and a very wide set of skills, *should* be like, doesn't mean that's what he's actually *going* to be like. That's just obvious.

Midoriya is Midoriya, through and through.

And yet sometimes Toshinori can't help but think that something is missing from him. Like he's holding something back. Either from himself or everyone around him. Maybe both.

But what would it be? What could Midoriya possibly be keeping from them all? What could he be hiding, and, more importantly, why doesn't he realize that doing so is hurting him?

Or, the dark part of Toshinori says, the side that has never fully pulled free from the darkness that stained his heart after his master's end, *he does realize it and just doesn't care.*

Which would raise more problems than it would solve them.

He stands at the door to the surgery room, watching through the floor to ceiling windows as the doctors work on keeping down Midoriya's infections. He hears muted beeping, and the team scrambles around again and moves quickly to fix whatever the issue is.

Toshinori keeps his breathing even. This has happened about thirty times since he started watching. It's like clockwork, so by now he's not too upset by it.

He still has to convince himself his ward will be okay every single time he hears the emergency beeping, though.

While Midoriya is mostly blocked from view by the doctors, Toshinori is able to see his face from this angle. He's unconscious, whether due to the scale of his injuries or due to the heavy duty drugs they're pumping into him, Toshinori doesn't know.

But his eyes are closed, and his cheeks are shaded a deep, dark red which washes out his freckles nearly completely. There are faint blood stains on his forehead and jaw, remnants from when the nurses quickly tried to clean him up the best they could before the surgery.

In sleep, Toshinori thinks, Midoriya looks more like a child. Awake, moving, fighting, he already has the makings of a hero in him; but now, unnaturally still and lying on an operating table, he looks like what he's meant to be. Midoriya rests there on that table, surrounded by six or so medical professionals, and looks small. Much smaller than the boy himself would probably like—Toshinori knows his ward has always had an issue with appearing 'weaker.'

And so it's pretty telling that the one time Midoriya ever actually looks like the child he's supposed to be is when he's out cold.

Toshinori doesn't know why he's ever surprised by this stuff nowadays.

Heroes in training never stay young for long. There's too many hardships involved with the profession for that.

"He reminds me a lot of you," Naomasa says, walking from behind to stand close to Toshinori, who feels a pang in his chest at the words.

"You made it here fast," he replies, ignoring the previous statement. "I didn't realize you were coming so soon."

Naomasa follows Toshinori's gaze and rubs the back of his neck, tilting his head to the side until he hears a satisfying *pop*. "Well, this isn't exactly within my jurisdiction, but the chief of police asked for me. Everyone is short staffed right now."

"I figured. It was a large-scale attack. Everyone is busy either cleaning up or trying to figure out what happened."

"Speaking of cleaning up," Naomasa continues, "is Shouta out there helping with the investigation?"

Toshinori glances at him and frowns. He wants to ask when *Aizawa* became *Shouta* between them but ultimately decides to ignore it for now. "We all arrived here at the same time early this morning, but once Aizawa saw that Young Midoriya would be in surgery for a while, he left. He hasn't been here since, though you'd probably get more information from Yamada when he's back."

"And where's he?"

"He went to make some calls. Said Midoriya's aunt would want to know what happened."

This seems to catch Naomasa's attention. "Mrs. Bakugou? She can be very protective. It's a good thing he's telling her, as she deserves to know."

Toshinori doesn't answer immediately. He was skeptical, admittedly. He doesn't think that telling Bakugou's mother, the woman who—according to Midoriya himself—pretty much raised the boy in absence of his father, will do as much good as it will harm. Sure, she probably is the closest thing to a blood relative of Midoriya, but should she really be involved in all of this?

She doesn't know about Rabbit—at least, not that she's said—or about One for All. Hell, she doesn't even know that the boy was homeless for a few years!

There's obviously a reason Midoriya keeps so much from her, so contacting her immediately after the events of Hosu to let her know what's happening to her nephew… it doesn't seem right. Midoriya should be the one to tell her. He should've had the choice to call her himself.

As if sensing his train of thought, Naomasa lifts one shoulder in a shrug. "She never would've known without some kind of intervention. He wouldn't have told her himself, that's for sure. That kid would wait until the end of time to admit his weaknesses if it meant others wouldn't worry."

"Being injured isn't a weakness," Toshinori counters.

"It is if the right person knows about it."

The beeping starts up again, capturing their attention. One of the doctors presses on the holographic screen on their right to enlarge the up-close feed of their work.

They're not even bothering with his hands. Are they that much of a lost cause? Oh, my boy…

Toshinori forces himself to watch the screen as they work. Some of this is familiar to him. He's been worked on in these settings so many times that he can almost picture himself in Midoriya's position.

Which is a scary thought, all things considering. Toshinori needs to be a better mentor. He has to work faster, try *harder.* He has to be more. For Midoriya's sake.

Here, Toshinori can see the way the teen's skin is rippling and stretching out in the areas around his open wounds. It's the work of his regeneration, no doubt. *Boost* is trying to stitch him up, and it's actually doing a pretty damn good job.

Except right now it needs to just *stop,* as the doctors need to keep some of those slices open until they finish.

"It's almost beautiful if you don't look at the context of the situation," Naomasa says, staring at it too. There's a pinch between his brows, and he looks like he's calculating something as he always is.

"I'd say it's more terrifying. His body works to keep him whole even while he's on the brink of death." Toshinori folds his arms. His legs ache to sit down, but he doesn't. "Though I've never seen it work this

fast before."

"It's a nuisance to the staff right now, looks like. The quirk suppressors don't seem to be working too well."

"He's getting stronger, then," Toshinori notes.

"Or maybe he was just getting healthier before all of this went down. Either way, they need to up his dosage soon unless they're deciding to keep *Boost* as a backup in case of an accident."

The *accident* being an event where Midoriya's life is in even worse peril.

The mere thought of it has Toshinori's side itching, his years-old, starburst shaped scar making itself known once more. His hand subconsciously goes to grab at it through his shirt, and his knuckles turn a lighter shade at the sheer strength he's holding the fabric with.

Guilt is eating away at his insides like poison, feasting on his failures, and Toshinori has to swallow back some blood before it can escape him.

Midoriya just makes him worry more than anything else ever has in his life. Even more than All for One, and not even Toshinori can figure out why.

The beeping ceases. Toshinori's breath slows, his jaw clenching.

"The heroes who first encountered the Nomu who killed Native reported that it had a variety of quirks, just like the one from the USJ Attack."

Naoamasa's voice is matter of fact. Almost conversational. But Toshinori has known him for long enough to see past it. "I figured that would be the case," he responds quietly, memories of the school invasion replaying in his mind like an old, broken record. "Will we be able to find out who the base was? It might give us some insight."

The Nomu at the USJ was formed using the body of one unlucky man, so Toshinori is curious to see whether the same will show for this case.

"As of right now, it doesn't look like it. This Nomu's body, Toshinori, is in a worse state than the one from the USJ. It's like it just fell apart on its own." A sharp, annoyed breath passes between his teeth. "My

team is having difficulty analyzing it."

Was it not completely done? Is that why it was destroyed so easily?

He's not trying to discredit his student, but Toshinori knows damn well that in the state Midoriya was in, defeating an entire Nomu was an outcome that was simply out of the question. There must be something more here that they're missing.

They may have to wait until Midoriya is healed and rested before getting that answer.

"It had a multitude of quirks. The heroes mentioned regeneration, but we already guessed that. They also said that it seemed as if it had a sort of sixth sense. It could tell where certain people were, and it had fast reflexes. It was obvious, at least to them, that it had a mission. They were chasing it away from a group of civilians and trying to capture it, but it was too fast."

Toshinori gets what he's trying to say. "It got to Native and the kids first."

"Yeah. Unfortunately." Naomasa shakes his head. He looks tired these days, but in this day and age, what law enforcer doesn't? "That isn't all I wanted to discuss with you, though." He pauses for a moment, as if gathering himself. When he continues, he sounds resigned. "When Midoriya killed it, which is what we're assuming… it… the quirk specialists said it had no quirks in its body. Not even a residue. If we were just going by its remains, we would have labeled the Nomu completely quirkless, which wouldn't match up with earlier accounts from the heroes."

There's a dirty, blood-encrusted curl sticking to Midoriya's forehead. Toshinori wishes he could brush it back. Wishes he could see the boy's eyes, bright and alive and eager, just as they were that first day they started their training on that beach.

"Toshinori. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The hero doesn't flinch. He had seen the reports himself earlier, courtesy of Aizawa, and had already made and fretted over his own theories. "I feel that if All for One were at the scene, we would've known. Everyone would've."

Naomasa looks away, instead focusing on their reflections in the window. "There are other explanations."

None that I appreciate, old friend.

“Maybe the Nomu was given a power that would erase everything it had when it died,” Toshinori offers. “A sort of self destruction quirk. That way we wouldn’t get any information.”

“Doubtful.”

“How so? Any villain will learn from his mistakes, and since we managed to take the first Nomu and gain some understanding of how these creatures are formed, I’m sure some failsafes were added to the new ones.”

“So why do the others still have their quirks?”

Toshinori doesn’t know what does it—the *gentleness* of his friend’s voice, the meaning behind the words, or the defeated way he says it—but his patience thins anyway. “What are you implying, Naomasa? This is paranoia talking.”

The detective doesn’t get offended or snap back. He just stares. “I’m not implying anything. I just think we need to broaden our mindset. The possibilities for an event like this, Toshinori, it’s… it’s difficult to comprehend. Everything is.”

As Naomasa finishes, Toshinori feels something stir in his mind. One for All hums in his veins, a familiar and welcome feeling after having it for all these years. This time, though, Toshinori frowns. There’s a pull, a *tug,* and suddenly the man is feeling a little… scared. Terrified, even. Guilt and sadness hits him like a freight train, and his attention is directed back toward the boy on the operating table.

At first, he doesn’t see what the world is wanting him to see, but then there’s movement and Midoriya’s finger twitches on his left hand, signaling life again.

The doctors see it at the same time and converse with each other, but Toshinori isn’t focused on them anymore.

Is he dreaming, or is he waking up? You can’t dream while under anesthesia, I thought.

Either way, the foreign feelings are gone, and Toshinori is brought back to himself when Naomasa reaches up to put a hand on his shoulder.

“I know.” Toshinori sighs deeply, responding to the detective’s previous comment. “I know it’s difficult. I apologize. I don’t mean to get so upset. We do need to think of every possible cause and course of action here, I understand.”

Naomasa’s hand leaves him. “Just promise me you’ll watch him closely. He’ll need your guidance more than anyone’s once this is all over. I know him well, even if he doesn’t realize it. After stuff like this happens, he closes off, tries to disappear. You’ll need to be careful.”

“I will, believe me.” He wouldn’t dream of leaving him alone. Memories of what happened the last time Midoriya was left unattended in a hospital flashes through his brain, making him wince. “Anyway, how are Iida and Todoroki? I wasn’t allowed to see them.”

It’s nice, at least, that the two boys were transported to the same hospital as Midoriya. It’s good to keep everything contained like this.

“They’re fine. I talked to them both individually before I came here. They’re holding up as well as they can given the situation.”

Toshinori closes his eyes. “This should never have happened.”

“Well, that’s obvious. But it’s over now. All we can do is try and repair things. That’s what we’re here for.” The beeping starts once again, and both hero and detective watch how the doctors handle it. It looks like they’re close to finishing. “The kids… they’ll just need a lot of support after this. I know UA can give that. I know *you* can, too, Toshinori.”

He can, can’t he? That’s not only his job but his responsibility.

Something swells in his heart at the reminder that he has something more to live for now. He has Midoriya. He has his students.

“They did great out there. I saw pictures of the wreckage they left behind while fighting Stain, and I was impressed.” Maybe impressed isn’t the right word. He’s proud, sure, but he’s also sad to know that they were forced to go beyond their own limits to simply survive and protect each other. “I know they’ll be okay, but I think that’s what scares me. I think this is a dark omen.”

“Dark omen?” There’s an amused lilt to Naomasa’s words. “Now who’s being paranoid?”

Toshinori laughs softly, brushing it off when his phone buzzes to tell him he’s received a text.

Ah. He has to meet Gran again at the entrance to bring him up to where Midoriya's room will be. The old hero was busy cleaning up the city and tying up loose ends at the scene of the crime. More specifically, he was cleaning up the blood on site to make sure Rabbit's DNA won't be linked to Midoriya.

Toshinori casts one more glance at his successor's body before saying farewell to Naomasa. Before he can make it out the door, Naomasa speaks, still not looking at him.

"When he wakes up, I'm going to have to speak with him about what happened. I need his version of events."

If you ask Toshinori, it's much too soon to start asking those kinds of questions, but he knows it's protocol. This is something bigger than just them, so Naomasa will have to question Midoriya as soon as possible. There's nothing Toshinori can do about it.

"I know we both want what's best for him," Naomasa continues. "That's always been the goal. But I think that doesn't always mean protecting him from consequences. Especially if those consequences would set him on a better path."

Toshinori furrows his brows. He wants to ask what that means, but he refrains from doing so at the last moment. Instead, he just nods and leaves, swallowing that bitter pill as his brain tries to unwrap the meaning.

"Why do you flinch so harshly?"

"I—I'm not sure what you mean, All—ah, *sir!* I just—I didn't know you'd be coming here. I'm—I'm embarrassed!"

The lie registers even before the words have even fully left the mouth, and All for One hums. "You're trembling, even now. Why?" All for One walks forward, his face one of concern as he approaches the man before him. "What do you think I will do to you?"

It's a trick question, and they both know it. All for One grins, pearly white teeth gleaming in the faint light of the building they're in. It's

the man's apartment, and it's a nice one, really. All for One doesn't need his eyes to see that. It's a penthouse, not unlike the one that he himself used to live in centuries ago, back when he was younger.

The man here has good taste.

"You're here to—to discuss the mission, right? The, uh, the previous one?" He backs away, and his lizard's tail accidentally knocks over one of the chairs belonging to his dining room table, causing him to fall to the ground with a hitch of breath.

"The failed mission," All for One specifies, and it's not up for debate.

All for One's subject for the night begins to back away again as he advances through the room, and his scaly eyes widen as he no doubt realizes what his master has come here for.

All for One never usually shows up to these sorts of events in person. He never shows his face. In fact, most of the people that he's worked with have never even *seen* him before. He's that secretive.

So for All for One to arrive here? At this person's own home address? It doesn't ever mean well.

The man must know that too.

"Yes, sir, that one," comes his response, shaky and hesitant. "We messed up, I know. And I—I will fix it! Believe me! We won't make the same mistake again, s-sir. We won't fail."

"Oh, I know you won't. Don't worry there," All for One assures him kindly. "I'm here to make sure of that, young one."

He lets his quirks wash over him for a second, his red and black lightning crackling all around him as his body comes alive with power. He breathes in deeply, enjoying the flood of warmth and the heat in his veins. As he lets his strength build up inside him, he welcomes the agonizing voices that are now shouting at the back of his mind. They always accompany him nowadays. They're growing more rambunctious.

It's becoming a bit bothersome, if he's to be honest. But All for One knows why this is happening, so his excitement outweighs the annoyance most times.

"S-Sir?" The man, the current leader of the underground group that

All for One hired to do some of his more taxing work, looks nothing like what he once was. His mutation quirk is bouncing around inside of him, teasing All for One whilst simultaneously trying to escape him. “Sir, I said we won’t fail you again. If you could just give me one more —”

His mouth snaps shut when All for One brings a finger to his lips, a small smile tugging at his features. “I give as many chances as one needs. Did you think of me as being unfair? Ah, I’m ashamed.”

The man starts to visibly tremble again when All for One comes to a stop right above him. He’s cowering, and something inside All for One gives a disgusted jolt. Despite this, however, his satisfaction remains.

His anger quickly replaces those emotions, though. He came here for a reason. When he heard what became of the mission he gave this group, he knew he needed to come as soon as his treatments allowed him to rectify the situation.

He doesn’t like repeated mistakes.

“I did not come here to punish you, though in ordinary circumstances I might’ve.” All for One ignores the way the man’s face contorts in horror. He crouches down, his large hand coming up to pull down his own metal mask, the one that supplies his oxygen.

Because of the years of continuous treatments, pretty soon he’ll be able to go without it as long as he’s not actively straining himself.

The light from the kitchen shines on All for One’s face, casting shadows over the sockets where his eyes once were. With his other hand he grabs a firm hold of the man’s forearm, right where a healing gash is. “I simply wanted to ask why you thought it was acceptable to almost kill my son, hm?”

For a moment, the earth is quiet. The stars stop burning, the particles in the air don’t move. Everything is at a standstill, and All for One loves it. He lives for those moments.

The *void* moments, he calls them. The times and areas in space where nothing exists. Nothing but him and whatever he desires.

And then the moment is over, and the universe is back on track.

“Your—! He was—he was your *son?”*

Like a fish out of water, his subject gapes and stutters over his words. His confusion and disbelief is palpable, and All for One waits with more patience than this man deserves.

The disbelief is short lived. When All for One doesn't make a move to continue, when he doesn't take back his words or say anything else, the man lets out a shuddering breath.

His fear returns tenfold. Regret burns like a raging fire inside him, and the situation seems to finally dawn on him. "Master," he says when he's conjured up the last bits of his waning confidence. It sounds like a plea. "Master, please. We didn't know. I—I didn't know! We were only told that he was—that you wanted him! That he had something of yours! Something he stole!" The man yanks his arm out of All for One's grip and begins to scrabble backwards, nails scraping against the tile beneath him. "I promise! Sir, we—we would have been more careful if we knew he was—!"

All for One stands and flicks his wrist in the direction of the man, and spikes made out of bone jut from the ground and go right through the meat of his thighs, pinning him right where he is. He ignores the anguished screams, not interested in playing nice anymore.

The day is almost over. He has other things to tend to than finishing off the attempted murderer of his own prized possession.

"Whether you knew about that boy's relationship to me isn't any of my concern anymore. You and your group were told to find where the vigilante *Rabbit* lived and flush him out of there. I didn't expect you to capture him, did I? I wasn't holding you to such standards. I merely said that if you *could* do so, I would reward you greatly. The only thing I very politely *asked* of you, though, was to try and run him out of the country. I would do all of the rest." All for One feels the familiar tingling in his throat and lets the flames escape his mouth. He lifts a hand and contains them in his palm, letting his fire, the same fire that Midoriya Inko loved dearly, swirl into a voracious ball.

"We—we *were* flushing him out! We didn't mean to almost kill him! My men—they—they were all there ready to head inside to get him when—when that *Hero Killer* arrived and fucked it all up!" Desperation claws into his watery voice. Tears are already leaking from his eyes and slipping down red cheeks. "He's the one who ruined everything! They had no way of—"

"Your entire group couldn't defeat one crooked man? Your weakness

betrays your credibility." Another bone spike, this one through the leader's abdomen. His yells rattle the walls. "I should've seen this coming. I suppose this is partially my fault. Maybe I shouldn't have—"

Quick footsteps cut him off. All for One turns, intrigued now, and waits for the feeling of the young one's quirk to come around the bend of the hallway. A young girl, maybe six or seven years old, stands there, green eyes wide and bloodshot, her curly hair frazzled and drenched with sweat.

Sometimes, All for One is very grateful for the quirk he stole a while back that allows him to see his surroundings in his mind, even without eyes. It's moments like these that make his job all the more worth it.

"Oh!" All for One's voice softens, suddenly delighted. "It seems your daughter couldn't hide away anymore. How very brave of her to hold out for this long."

"Wait!" The man struggles and writhes against the bone spikes. "Master, don't! Let her go! Please, please, *don't touch her!"* When All for One doesn't respond immediately, the man turns to the girl himself, shouting what must be her name. "Get out of here, now! Go out that front door and get out of this building—!"

A snap of All for One's fingers, and the air is *wooshed* out of the man's lungs temporarily. "Why, no need to scare her like that. I'm not going to hurt a child for her father's mistakes." He smiles at the girl, who shrinks back. She has a tail too, but hers is shorter and has little spikes on it. "I'm just a friend of your father's, dearie. Don't look so afraid. Come here."

He opens up his arms in invitation, tilting his head to the side. She hesitates, though, and when she moves a little bit into the light, All for One can see a small plushie of the hero *Wash* clutched tightly in her grip.

And oh, how touching. This reminds All for One of some other time.

The man regains his breath and is now shouting. "I said *get to the door! Do you hear me?"*

All for One holds her gaze. "He isn't being very nice to you, is he? Just come take my hand. I want you to see what happens next."

In two seconds, the man manages to dislodge one of the bone spikes,

which throws All for One's idea down the gutter. The man tries to scramble to his feet. His lizard's tail elongates, about to wrap around All for One, but then there's a whistle, and an invisible blade comes down to slice right through the tail at the base. Another spike comes up, coming through the back of the man's neck and curving into his skull.

And just as quickly as it started, it's over.

Even as the man's quirk fizzles out once and for all, his tail flops around and swings from where it lies on the ground, unattached.

How bothersome, he thinks. *He made me dirty this lovely penthouse. It could've been done without so much blood.*

When he turns back, having successfully silenced the man, the girl is staring at the fire building up in All for One's palm. She looks like she's in awe, which makes All for One gleam.

He kneels down again, holding it out to her. She's so young and in so much distress that she probably can't even comprehend what's happening. Or what just became of her father.

"My son loved to look at the fire too," he says quietly when she's stepped closer, as if drawn to it. "It can be a source of comfort when you've lost your way."

She doesn't answer. Not that he expects her to. She holds the plushie tighter to her chest, her tears spilling out at an even faster rate. It's only when she's this close that he can see the freckles on her cheeks.

And how perfect is this scene?

The girl stands in front of him, face pinched. All for One doesn't pay any mind to the dead man behind him. He doesn't matter. He never did.

"Do you want to see how fast it can spread?"

When it's all over with, the building is crumbling to the ground, engulfed in red and orange. The poor child stayed there beside her father's body, mesmerized by the heat, left with nothing else to live for, and All for One almost felt bad.

Maybe some hero will go in there to save her as one did for his son. Or maybe not.

Whatever happens, it will be the man's fault.

Nevertheless, he has a new mission now.

The Hero Killer ruined the plan, which is fine. He already knew that. All for One will take care of him next. He knows the vigilante trained his son, he knows he took care of him, so he's not *really* surprised by what happened when little Izuku's building was destroyed.

But even still.

As he listens to the reports of the Hosu incident, as he hears where the Hero Killer is to be sentenced to for the rest of his life, he hears the voices come back with a new vigor.

Izuku must feel it too, he thinks. All for One can feel the ache. The sorrow. *Izuku's* sorrow. Even from here.

He can feel his son. And how exhilarating is that?

He has the quirks, now, doesn't he? *Wonderful.* It's just as he wanted.

A smile curls onto his lips, and it makes him look cruel. Makes him wish he could be there to witness whatever pain his son is going through now.

He chuckles, and the sound echoes despite there not being any walls around him.

A heart that slowly dies, he muses, hanging on to the feeling of his son, awake and alive and powerful—but not for forever. *My boy, this is how it was always meant to be.*

Chapter End Notes

everything by design

I feel like Izuku would listen to this song on yt back when he was at his old apartment and working on his suit upgrades til the early hours of morning

(next chap coming soon! i just had to split it up or else this chap would've been over 15k)

f

perjury

Chapter Notes

> big thanks to phantom for helping me with the wording in this chapter!! she always has the best ideas!! she helps me with tense and emotional scenes since they fucking kill my brain and motivation sometimes 😩!!
>
> (this chap is for cal! i too love dadmic. I promise the next chaps will have even more of it! along with some angst, bc I like that)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Is there ever really a normal way to live after you've killed someone? Izuku doesn't think so.

It's not a strange concept to him. Murder, that is. He was committing it in some ways long before he knew what the word really meant. That's just how it was back then.

That's just how it was having a parasite as your quirk, more fittingly.

He's been called many things in his life. Some of those things are good. Some of the nicknames and pet names he's been given are attached with good memories—like *sweetie* or *honey* or *kiddo* or *sugar* or *son* or *my boy*. He doesn't mind those. He never has. He doesn't mind Rabbit, obviously. He doesn't even mind Bunny that much!

But the other names he's accumulated over the years are not so nice. Others are ones he'd rather forget. Ones like thief, bastard child, street rat, villain, liar, *murderer*.

The last one isn't a new one, and yet Izuku still feels a twinge of pain in his chest upon reading the subtitles on the news station he's watching on the television.

They've been covering the news of Hosu on all channels for a few hours now, and they've all been boiling down to one story: the fact that Pro Hero Native is dead, and that the Vigilante Rabbit was there and couldn't stop it.

Of course, in the eyes of the public, in the eyes of the drama-hungry press, the only viable reasoning is that Rabbit killed the hero himself. Or at least refused to stop his death from happening.

In other words, they're blaming Izuku for Native not making it. And in a way? They're not even wrong.

"Various eyewitnesses report that Rabbit was at the scene multiple times in different places. He helped contain the destruction caused by the Nomu you see here, but in the end, it seems his true colors were revealed when Pro Hero Native stepped up to defend—"

Izuku shifts uncomfortably in his bed, and he must have accidentally touched the remote by his side because it changes the channel. This one isn't any better, though.

"—and this morning we're discussing what everyone has been talking about nonstop since these tragic events. This is Rabbit: Japan's Most Loved Vigilante or Most Wanted? Let's dive deep into what we know right now—"

His eyes slide shut, and he tries his best to tune it out.

The government wants him brought in. That's not new, it never has been, but this time is more serious. Killing a pro hero is a big deal. They don't have proof that he did it, but they wouldn't need it.

It's exactly the kind of situation that Izuku has feared since the very start.

"And let's hear some opinions from our viewers! First up…"

There's static, probably from someone being patched through on their end, and Izuku ducks his head down lower, trying to not listen. His right arm is in a large cast up to his shoulder and neck, so he can't move it.

He can't even feel it.

His left arm is a little better, but it's wrapped in bandages too. He was instructed not to move it around, so it's not like he can plug his ears using his hand.

Izuku is left to listen to the consequences of his stupid, stupid actions.

"—think that we've been puttin' a little too much faith in this kid. We've had him on such a high pedestal that it's no wonder we didn't see this comin'. We shoulda known, ya know?"

"And what do you mean by that, sir? Can you elaborate for the audience?"

"Well, he's not some friendly neighborhood vigilante, for one. He's not

some Spider-Man from those old comics! He's a reckless teenager with no respect for the law or for true heroics. If he truly wanted to save people, he'd do it the traditional, lawful way. He's just a dangerous, powerful kid that we've let go unchecked for too long. And now look where we're at because of it!" There's a heavy, annoyed breath. *"Instead of helpin' the city in the time of an attack, he chose to do what he does best: leave even more destruction and tragedy behind him."*

"Thank you for your time. Next listener…"

Izuku was never trying to be something like Spider-Man. He's not nearly so selfless. But the fact remains that he *is* exactly what the man said. He does leave behind destruction. It follows him wherever he goes.

And during that fight… no, even *before* that, when Izuku was fighting that moth Nomu, he almost let civilians die. He almost let a kid die.

He did that. Rabbit. Midoriya Izuku. He was trying to contain the creature, trying to finish it off quickly, but he was too weak. He couldn't do it! He was trapped, and he was going to die. He was going to get everyone killed.

If not for those heroes who came in and saved Izuku and the mother and daughter, Native wouldn't have been the only one dying because of him that night.

The pro hero's face pops up in his mind, and Izuku snaps back to reality. Every time he blinks, he's there. He sees the red in the corner of his vision, sees the vertebrae sticking out from a dislodged head, and it won't stop.

Don't look, is what he was trying to say to the boys before he was killed. Izuku knows it.

And God, how fucked up is that? He knew he was going to die, he already accepted it, and his first thought was still to try and protect them.

Native was a true hero. Izuku doesn't give a rat's ass about whatever he did in his past or what his motives were, he doesn't *care* about whatever shit *Stain* found on him that made him believe the man had to be culled.

Maybe Izuku should've killed Stain.

These thoughts, coupled with the guilt and sadness jumbling around inside him, take the form of anger.

He's angry at himself. Angry at his father, his brother, at *Stain.* He's angry at how the media is choosing to focus on *Rabbit* than on the actual problem at hand. People lost their homes! Everything has changed in Hosu and even beyond. People are becoming more fearful, more distrustful of heroes.

Doesn't everyone see that? Why can't they see it?

And more than anything, though, he's angry at… he's angry at One for All.

Why did you tell me not to kill him? He thinks, reaching out for the voices for one of the first times. They've been silent ever since he woke up, either because he can't exactly use any of his quirks right now or due to the fact that they don't want to talk to him anymore, he doesn't know. *Why would it have mattered if I did? How many heroes has he killed or paralyzed? How many? How many innocent lives has he hurt?*

There's silence. It makes him burn hotter.

You guys like to give your opinions even when I never ask or want it, but now you're quiet? Now you won't answer?

There are people inside his head. They belong to the quirks he's stolen, they belong to the past users of One for All. He's not stupid anymore. He's not going to disillusion himself any longer.

One for All wanted to keep Stain alive, and Izuku didn't. But he still *listened* to them.

They're already calling him a murderer on the television, so what would it have mattered if he took Stain down too?

Why do you care so much about our opinions?

Izuku jumps, his skin crawling. This is a new voice. It's familiar and yet not all at the same time.

This one matches Izuku's tone. It sounds angry too.

"I don't," Izuku grits out, trying to focus so he can hear the voice's reply amidst the sound of the people on the television. "I never did."

Now you just sound stupid. Don't forget that we live inside your shitty

mind, kid. We know everything about you. You can't lie to us.

"Get *out* of my head if you don't like it then. You'd be doing me a favor."

There's a scoff. *You brought us here. Do something about it.*

And there it is: the bitter truth. This is happening because of Izuku. *He* accepted One for All. He decided to try and become a hero despite all of his past experiences and instincts warning him not to. *He* said yes to Aizawa and Yamada that day when they asked if he wanted to stay with them.

He's always been one selfish fucking fool.

If you didn't care for what we had to say, the voice continues scathingly, echoing in his mind, *you would've killed Stain anyway. I know you have it in you.*

Izuku doesn't disagree. He squeezes his eyes shut again and sees his extensive Rabbit file, the one he stole from the police station not too long ago. He sees the multiple murders listed on there, sees the cases where Rabbit went a little too far and edged into *brutality* , sees the mistakes he made earlier on in his vigilantism when he was young and stupid and blinded by the rage his father left him with—and he knows that *murderer* has never been an unjust nickname.

Some of the deaths listed under his name aren't true, while others… Well, Izuku can't say he dealt their final blows, but he was definitely involved.

To him, though, that's just as bad as if he *had* personally finished them off.

There's an itch on his skin, under his bandages, and he can't reach it. He realizes he's beginning to breathe heavily, and he tries halfheartedly to calm himself. The last thing he needs is a nurse coming in to check what's wrong with his respiration. The machine to his left is a snitch.

Technically he's not even supposed to be up. He's been given strict orders to *sleep* and let his body focus on healing, but he just can't help it. He can't sleep. He doesn't want to.

He knows what he'll see if he does.

Just when he thinks he has his breathing back under control, a stabbing pain shoots through his temples. He can't help the cry that escapes him, but once it leaves his mouth, it's like the floodgates have been opened. Immediately, a rush of emotions hit him right in the chest, peeling back his bones to make enough room for themselves inside.

They're not his own feelings, he knows that for a fact, but they're *there,* and it hurts, and it's overwhelming, and it doesn't *stop.*

It's like his senses have been dialed up to a thousand.

Worry overtakes him, along with grief and fear and paranoia and everything in between. Excitement is in there somewhere, but it's drowned out rather quickly. Some of what he's sensing is familiar while most of it is not.

He's feeling the emotions of the people inside this hospital. He can't pick them all out, as it's all jumbled together and hazy, but he's *feeling* it.

This is the second time that this has happened. The first time was right after he woke up from surgery. He was panicked and in a frenzy, having forgotten, for one brief moment, exactly where he was and if the fight was over yet. It was a good thing that Yamada was already there, right by his bedside and typing away on his laptop (the one Izuku upgraded for him). There's no telling what would've gone wrong if Izuku happened to be alone when he woke up.

Izuku wasn't thinking or seeing clearly, and so he nearly *bit* the man when he touched his good hand to bring him out of his panic. Yamada's quick reflexes saved him from it, fortunately, and the hero quickly grabbed both sides of Izuku's face to stop him from thrashing about even more.

He doesn't know why he did it. If Izuku was faced with something like that, his first instinct would be to restrain, not to comfort, but in Yamada's defense it worked.

The warmth from his palms, the softness—it reminded Izuku fleetingly of his mother. And it's a weird, sick thing to think, but it happened. It felt nice. The touch.

So nice, in fact, that Izuku immediately stilled. His muscles went slack, his mouth fell open a little, and he just stared blankly at the blond in front of him, who was still holding his face.

All of those emotions disappeared. Just like that.

For a second there, Izuku was wondering if he had actually died.

But then Yamada's hands retreated, he began talking to him quickly with concern, his DJ accent slipping out a few times on accident, and Izuku was floating away again.

Yamada's grounding technique worked to stop the influx of emotions for him then, so what will Izuku do now?

Everything around him has energy now. Like there's an electric hum going through every living animal, even non-humans. It reminds Izuku of *Extract* with how it can sense quirks and eventually be able to pick them out and recognize them, but *this* kind of power has a noticeable difference.

Unlike *Extract,* it seems like it can be turned off. Izuku just has to figure out how to control it.

This is one of the new quirks, he's sure. A… a sixth sense that pertains to emotions or motives. If one is strong enough in a particular area, it takes over his own emotions. He's too out of it right now to be able to determine the range, but he has a good idea of what it might be.

He shifts around in the bed, trying to move his stiff limbs and focus on something other than *this.* His insides have been squeezed tight, and he feels like he's going to throw up—which he does not want to do. That's just embarrassing. Someone would have to clean that up, and they'd call his legal guardian, *Nezu,* to inform him, and no, he does not need that. Izuku doesn't want to see that rat.

Doesn't want to be picked apart by the mammal's analytical gaze once again when he's at his very weakest. No. He can stay wherever he is.

You want the blond man to come back.

Izuku's nose crinkles at the voice, the tips of his ears reddening. "Stop talking to me."

He's ignored. Figures.

Have you always relied on adults like that?

Izuku bristles. "If you already know everything about me, shouldn't you know the answer to that?"

I don't search through your memories like the others do.

Like a balloon that's been popped, Izuku's irritation leaves him, freeing up more space for everyone else's emotions. "Memories? You can—you can *do* that?" Horror settles into the pit of his stomach. "You can see… *everything* that I have? How can you—"

Geez, you're not very bright.

Well, that certainly brings his anger back. Izuku is fired up once more, the pounding in his head and the stupid fucking *voice* grating on his ears making him explode.

"Fuck off!" He shouts, his tremors coming back. "Don't you have something else to do besides degrade people, or is that all you did even when you were alive?"

Ask your father.

It's a slap to the face. The reminder of who some of these voices are, the knowledge of how Izuku relates to them (not only through One for All), makes the boy suddenly feel queasy.

He feels the sudden urge to apologize but somehow doesn't think it would do anything. They probably don't want him to apologize, as it would be rather insulting.

He isn't sure how it happens or when it did, but by the time he forces himself to stop thinking of All for One and the past users of One for All, the extra emotions are gone. They've been blocked out, and he's left to only experience his own—which is how he wants it to stay.

Okay, so the quirk can be dealt with. He just has to experiment some other time to figure out exactly how. It'll be… just like old times. Back when he was learning about *Boost* and *Deflect* and *Force*.

For now, though, he has to deal.

And maybe he does want Yamada to come back to help. He really can't deny that. He berates himself for thinking it, as the man hasn't even been gone for that long, but the feeling is still there.

It's been a few hours since he first woke, and Yamada left forty-five minutes ago for an emergency meeting. He didn't want to go, he'd told Izuku as such, but apparently he had no choice. It was a district-wide pro hero meeting, and a lot of heroes were directed to come.

Izuku can guess what it's about. The Nomu. Plans for rebuilding and better protection for civilians. Research team formations. All of that good stuff.

It's something that Rabbit would usually eavesdrop on whenever he heard there was going to be one, but of course that's not an option right now. He'll have to miss out.

Huh. Maybe he can ask Yamada for details when he comes back.

Or… maybe Aizawa. Is he there? Izuku isn't sure. Yamada didn't say anything about him.

The underground hero has been busy cleaning up, and he hasn't seen Izuku yet. He hasn't called or texted—not that Izuku would be able to reply back if he had, to be fair. It's just a little weird.

Aizawa was the first one there when his apartment exploded. He *stayed* with him in the hospital.

So where is he now?

He has no obligation to Izuku, obviously, and Izuku definitely doesn't need him here… he doesn't—he doesn't *want* him here, but…

It's making him anxious. He knows he's done something wrong, knows that he's in trouble in more ways than one, so why isn't Aizawa here? Usually he'd be the first to tell him he's done something wrong. He's never hesitated before.

Hell, even *Yamada* was a little terse. He was worried, sure, and he was very patient and didn't yell at all, but Izuku can tell (not just because of the new power he's trying to get used to) that he was a little upset.

He didn't say much about what happened, however. He was more focused on making sure Izuku wasn't in pain.

Yamada told Izuku about how Gran Torino brought him to the hospital after he fell unconscious and then explained how they had rushed from Musutafu to Hosu upon seeing the news and receiving the notification from his panic button.

(Izuku didn't know the wristband monitored his vitals, too, as apparently Nezu had access to them. The teachers didn't know either. Sneaky rat *bastard.* If another band is made to replace the old one, Izuku is going to have a say in how it's manufactured.)

Mitsuki was called, much to Izuku's horror, but really he is kind of glad Yamada was the one who did it. Auntie was grateful he informed her of the situation and apparently promised to call Izuku soon, if only because she wasn't allowed to physically come to the hospital (and also because Yamada insisted she stay near Bakugou while he's at his internship in case things happened over there).

So it didn't go *terribly*. All Yamada said he told her was that he was at his internship and helped with fighting the creatures called the Nomu, which is why he's so banged up. It's not really a lie, so Izuku appreciated it.

Yamada is great with words in a way that Izuku doesn't think he'll ever be.

Izuku had asked the man how Iida and Todoroki were, as he was fearing the worst despite ensuring their safety himself before taking on the winged Nomu, and he was relieved to hear that they're here as well with minor injuries.

They're still shaken up, but they're going to be released sometime before Izuku.

The topic changed after that, and Izuku found himself telling Yamada a little bit about how this whole thing started—the train, the attack, how he followed after Gran (Izuku left out the part where he was told not to go, though he doubts Yamada didn't fill that bit in himself), the Moth Nomu, and then how he almost had his arm ripped off after tearing off its wings.

Yamada asked if that's how his wristband broke, and Izuku sheepishly answered with a meek *yes*.

Which then prompted Yamada to ask The Forbidden Question: *Why didn't you press the emergency button before that? Were you not able to on the train?*

Izuku looked down at his bandaged hands, feeling very self-conscious, and didn't speak for a few seconds. He didn't know what to say then, truthfully.

What could he have said? Without sounding like a total idiot? The reasons why he didn't press the button are stupid. Thinking back on it, he was just being a goddamn *fool*.

"I… I don't…"

Yamada peers at him over red frames, brows furrowed. "Did you not want to?"

Izuku winces. His throat and tongue feels dry. He wants to ask for water but stops himself. "It's—I—I mean, partially? I think? Not that—that I was trying to evade it or something! I wasn't… purposefully not *doing it, I just…"*

He just what? Izuku wracks his brain to try and come up with some kind of reasonable explanation. He's not looking for an excuse, just a reason. He doesn't want to seem like some idiot to Yamada of all people.

"I… forgot it was there," he whispers.

Yamada says nothing.

"I was too busy fighting. It—I wanted to help, and I had to be quick. It slipped my mind, Yama. Honest." His face contorts, and he can't look his teacher in the eye. "I'm not… used to it. Having that kind of access to help. I've never had that option before."

"It does take some getting used to, huh?" Yamada says, a little softer now, as if remembering something.

Izuku swallows and forces himself to look him in the eye. "I wasn't trying to get hurt, and I didn't mean to keep you in the dark. I'm, uh, sorry I worried you. And… that I broke the wristband. I'm sure it was expensive to make."

"It's not your fault the Nomu attacked you, Midoriya."

Izuku stops himself from disagreeing. Yamada doesn't know about his father, so there's no reason for him to know that Izuku feels otherwise. "Yeah, but I could've been more careful, I think."

"We can all be more careful sometimes, kiddo. I'm just glad you're alright." He smiles a little, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Well, mostly."

"I'll heal," Izuku says simply, wanting to make sure Yamada knows that this hasn't broken him.

"Not everything does after an event like this, son."

He was nice. Almost too nice. Izuku has to constantly remind himself that Yamada is not like the other adults. He is not kind as a way to trap him. He is not trying to lure him in with a false sense of security

or something. He is kind because Yamada Hizashi genuinely wants to help people.

When they were sitting there together for almost an hour just talking about random things to get their minds off of what happened, with nurses coming and going at random intervals, Izuku felt the need to clarify something.

"Um. About Rabbit," Izuku begins awkwardly, his tired gaze glued to the television where they're currently talking about him. "I didn't… bring my costume because I didn't, er, not *respect you or anything. I do respect you! I know you told me not to bring it, but I just… It—it makes me anxious when I don't have it. It's like, uh, a comfort thing? Maybe? I don't know." He laughs nervously then, but it comes out choked and scratches at his throat. "I know I should've told you, or at least tried to explain to you why I wanted it with me, but… I just don't want you to think I did it just to—to disobey? Or to undermine you? And I'm… I didn't want to break your trust."*

The last few words are hesitant, almost spoken as a question. Izuku is about to start convulsing due to the wait when Yamada suddenly laughs.

"Kiddo, you didn't break my trust. I know that these kinds of things are a… a learning process, yeah? We're all trying here, and I'm not goin' into this expecting you to be perfect, just as I'm not perfect! Neither is Sho. You've only been staying with us for a couple weeks, so—as Sho likes to say—it would be illogical *to just assume the road won't be a little rocky. For all of us involved."*

Izuku frowns to himself. I genuinely think you can do no wrong, and that's bad, I know, but seriously, *he thinks.*

A small smirk slides onto Yamada's face. "'Sides, did ya really think I didn't already know you took your costume?"

Izuku's head snaps around so he can look at him, dumbfounded. The movement hurts, but he ignores it. "Huh?"

"I noticed it was gone the first night you were at your internship, listener. I had to coax Missy out from your room to feed her, and I noticed it wasn't in your usual spot on the back of the door."

"Oh," is all Izuku can say, the epitome of intelligence. He's beet red now, mentally kicking himself for not at least trying a little harder to hide the fact he brought his costume.

“Yeah, oh,” *Yamada laughs again, but not unkindly. He’s teasing more than anything now. “We’re pros, remember? We tend to notice that kind of stuff immediately.”*

Izuku nods, thinking hard. While that’s out of the way at least, there’s still something he’s concerned about. Something he won’t be able to forget if he doesn’t address it now.

“But what if I do break your trust someday?” He asks, gazing intently at him, sounding small.

Yamada lifts up one shoulder in a shrug, unperturbed by the question. “Well, trusting you is my decision, kiddo. Proving me wrong is your choice.”

At that moment, Izuku didn't think he fully understood what he meant, but now he does. Yamada has faith in him. Yamada believes in him and trusts him, probably more than he should. For Izuku to lose that faith, he’d have to do something with that as an intention. He’d have to do it purposefully, and he’d have to screw up *big.*

That trust wouldn’t be lost over something like this.

Yamada was basically saying not to worry too much about it, because *he’s* not. It’s Izuku’s sole responsibility if he decides to break everything they have.

That fact is a little more comforting than he first imagined.

He’s still remembering the details of his conversation with Yamada, trying to push away that childish longing for the man to come back, when he feels him.

Detective Tsukauchi Naomasa arrived at the hospital even before Izuku woke up, but he hasn’t seen him yet. Izuku has been tracking him on and off using *Extract,* more out of nervousness than anything, and he’s been growing more and more anxious as the time passes.

His quirks are fifty-fifty right now. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don’t. Whatever drugs the hospital has him on are messing with his internal systems, and it’s throwing his balance off. It doesn’t help that his body is trying to process the new quirks he has. That empathy quirk (Izuku will have to find a name for it soon) seemed to fit in rather quickly, but the others? Izuku doesn’t know what they are yet, if they’ll even do anything to him at all, or when they’ll settle. He knows he has the new regeneration, but he can’t exactly test it out

here.

Extract is thriving in the moments that Izuku can use it, though. It's positively beaming.

Izuku hates the fact that he actually feels kind of happy because of it. He's deprived it of fresh energy for so long that it's no wonder it's been practically draining him of his own resources to make up for it.

(And when did he start feeling sympathy for a damn quirk? Maybe it's that new power he has…)

Anyway, Izuku can feel the Detective walking down the halls now, heading in the direction of Izuku's room. He's done it a few times and stood outside for a minute or two before leaving to do something, which is odd, to say the least.

Izuku doesn't think he's ever known Tsukauchi to be so hesitant. It's like he's waiting for something.

This time, though, Izuku has a feeling this is it.

Just as he suspected, there's a knock—three quick ones, then a fourth with one long pause in between. That's Tsukauchi's usual knocking pattern.

The man doesn't wait for a response. The handle twists, the door opens, and Izuku thinks tiredly that he's not exactly ready for this.

He looks just the same as Izuku remembers him to be, but *something* has obviously changed. His face is a little tense, his laugh lines looking a little more prominent along with the wrinkles that don't accurately reflect his age.

Just like the others, Tsukauchi has been busy.

Izuku's good arm buzzes with energy. He looks out the window, not having the courage to meet his gaze. "Are you here to arrest me?"

A pause. "Well, good to see you, too, son."

Can't we skip that? I'm not new to interrogations, Tsuki. You don't have to pretend.

Tsukauchi fills in the silence, shuffling inside the room and closing the door behind him. "Why do you ask? Do you want me to?"

Izuku takes the first question in stride. “You have handcuffs on your hip. Detectives don’t usually carry handcuffs when they’re just interviewing someone.” He hums. “Unless they already know what they’re going to hear.”

“I’m happy to inform you then that there are other occasions a detective might need handcuffs for,” Tsukauchi chides, though his tone is light.

Izuku can’t help but grin to himself. “I think we’re thinking of two different things here.”

“I should smack you for that, among other things.”

“You can’t, because that would be assault.”

“Battery, actually. It’s called battery.”

Izuku throws him an accusatory look, beating back that nervous-yet-humorous side of his with a stick. “I don’t see how you being here is legal. You know who I am. Have for a couple weeks now.”

“Nothing is ever legal these days, Midoriya.” He sinks into the chair beside Izuku’s bed, and he sets his small suitcase on the empty mini table. Izuku eyes it. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while, and I’m sure you know about what, but now probably isn’t the best time. I apologize for waiting so long to see you—I wasn’t ignoring you. I want to make that very clear, alright? I just needed to take care of some things before we could safely contact each other.”

Izuku tries not to let his slight bitterness show. “I didn’t think you were ignoring me.”

His reply is immediate. “Remind yourself what my quirk is, son.”

Shit. How could he have forgotten?

Izuku exhales slowly, facing the window again. It’s going to rain soon. He wants the storm to hurry up and come. “Sorry. Reflex.”

“Like I said, we need a rain check on that conversation. We still have a lot we need to discuss with each other, and I’m not going to put it off too much longer. Right now, though, we need to talk about what happened last night.”

At the shift in tone, Izuku’s jaw clenches.

He doesn't know what to do here. He can *barely* look Tsukauchi in the eye. It's weird, really. Before this, he had so much he wanted to say to Tsukauchi. He wanted to apologize for keeping so many secrets from him, especially Rabbit and his homelessness and his parents. He wanted to apologize for what happened that night when his apartment burned down. And then for everything in between then and now.

Izuku also wanted to ask him about some of his recent cases. He wanted to tell him about Overhaul, as Izuku wants to make sure that if something does happen to him, that the little girl will be taken care of. He needs to know that someone else will have the information he did and act on it quickly.

But now? After Hosu? After Native? The words have escaped him.

Maybe he's scared. Maybe he's a little apprehensive yet resigned all at once.

A bit of fear bites into him again at the reminder that Detective Tsukauchi is here, finally seeing Izuku for what he really is: a stupid delinquent who's been terrorizing him for years, and also Rabbit. Another delinquent, just a different flavor.

The dynamic has changed between them, just as it had with Aizawa when his identity was revealed, and Izuku isn't excited about having to find that balance again with someone else.

"I…" He trails off. He hasn't made up a cover story to protect Gran Torino yet. Or—or Iida. He can't exactly say that the boy was there first, fighting Stain because he was feeling vengeful. He hasn't even talked with Todoroki or Iida yet since it happened, so he doesn't know what they've said. He doesn't have a way of knowing what he needs to say to match up with their stories.

What he needs is another few hours by himself to think things through, but he knows he can't have that.

"I'm alive," Izuku deadpans. He glances at his casts, trying to move them inch by inch. He still can't feel his right arm. The doctor said he probably won't feel it for a long time yet, if it all.

Maybe that scares Izuku too.

"That's more than what some can say," he continues when Tsukauchi doesn't answer immediately.

“And you’ve always been an optimist.”

“Isn’t there a first time for everything, Tsukauchi?”

Silence. They both bask in the comfort of *nothing* for a few minutes, listening to the storm rolling in fast. It’s nice, really, the small break, the pause for preparation, but then it’s over too soon.

“You blinded him. Stain.”

“Oh,” Izuku says. It’s not like he was trying to or anything.

“They had to remove his eyes completely because of the way his face was smashed in.” Tsukauchi makes something between a triumphant and tired noise. “It’s a good thing he already didn’t have a nose, or that would’ve caused some irreversible damage too.”

Huh. “And what about his quirk?”

“His mouth was messed up pretty badly, along with his jaw. The doctors at the facility couldn’t do much to help with that. His tongue is barely functional now, too. It’s going to hinder the way he eats and uses his quirk. He may even have to relearn how to talk, if he’s able to at all. Honestly, they’re not sure yet.”

Good, he thinks. *So he’s essentially quirkless now. That’s exactly what I wanted.*

Tsukauchi is studying him. Izuku can feel his gaze on his face and wonders how much of his feelings he’s actively showing even without meaning to. He must be waiting for a response of some kind, so Izuku makes a noncommittal noise. “Wow.”

“How hard did you hit him?”

The question takes Izuku aback. He stares at him, gaze falling lower to the notepad now on his lap. “Twenty-five percent,” he mutters, not surprised when the man doesn’t write that down. He can’t mention One for All in the reports. He also can’t mention Izuku at all when talking about Stain, as technically it was Rabbit who fought him. “We needed to finish him off.”

“So your friends said,” Tsukauchi says, nodding.

Izuku’s eyes narrow, not liking his tone. “If you already saw them, why do you need my version of events? They probably remember it

better than I do anyway."

"It's protocol. I know you know that, son." He doesn't back down one bit. "Besides. An individual's experience will never be the same as the next person's. I still need to know how you involved yourself in all of this. So if you will, please start from the beginning."

"Weird, but okay. I was born during a storm in the middle of July—"

"You know what I mean."

Izuku's expression sours. "I'm making this interesting."

"You're dragging it out. Forgive me, son, but I think we're past these kinds of games now."

And just what the hell does that mean? Izuku's heart gives a little jump in panic, but he obeys anyway.

Just as he did with Yamada, he starts from the train. He details his experiences on it to the best of his ability, mentioning some of the civilians he interacted with and even giving their appearance just in case. He talks about the first Nomu and how Gran went to fight it, and then he describes how he went after them and ended up having to fight the Moth Nomu. When he says he directed the Nomu up into the sky and tore its wings off, Tsukauchi gives him a funny look, but otherwise he doesn't say anything.

He continues on with Tsukauchi asking questions every now and then for clarification, but mostly it's just Izuku talking. He's offered a bottle of water in the middle of it, which he accepts gratefully. Except he can't exactly pick it up *and* take the cap off, so Tsukauchi has to help him with that. Any other time Izuku wouldn't have allowed that kind of weakness, but here he's a little too desperate and worried for what might be coming to care.

"You shouldn't be straining your hand, even your left one," Tsukauchi warns, practically holding the bottle up himself as Izuku drinks.

Izuku shakes his head when he finishes, letting the man take it back whilst also trying to ignore how humiliating this is. "It's fine, just sore."

"I believe the doctors more than I do you," Tsukauchi snorts.

Izuku ignores him completely and talks about how Endeavor

eventually showed up to save him and Gran during the duo fight. He tells Tsukauchi his detailed observations of the Nomu, even including his own theories about them.

It's all simple, practiced, and familiar. It's a mission report, really. Nothing special about it.

But then Izuku reaches the part where he *really* fucked up.

"Gran, uh, he turned his back and went to fight with Endeavor, and I, like… y'know. Changed into Rabbit. And went for him."

"You went for Stain yourself?" Tsukauchi asks, voice giving nothing away yet.

"Yes. I kind of guessed where exactly he'd show up, and I was right."

Tsukauchi makes a note on a separate sheet. He changed to this one when Izuku started talking about Rabbit, which is mildly concerning.

Izuku wants to know who exactly it's for, and why he already seemed to have that sheet at the ready.

"You used to be his apprentice, didn't you?"

The matter-of-fact tone has Izuku tensing a little, defensiveness making his hair prickle. "Did Aizawa tell you that?"

"He told me a lot of things."

"Then why are you asking me things you already know?" It's not… *angry,* really. Izuku sounds more careful than anything else.

Tsukauchi gives him a blank look, and Izuku bites the inside of his cheek.

That's right. His quirk. He's just trying to make sure things are the way he thinks. He's setting a foundation right now, that's all. He can only do that by proving things for a fact with his ability to detect lies.

"Yeah," Izuku breathes out after a moment. "He used to train me."

"Is that how you figured out where he'd be?"

"Partially. He's just easy to predict. Endeavor was only in Hosu because he was waiting for him, too, so that's proof of that."

“Where was Native when you first arrived?”

Izuku answers a lot more softly, running back through all of the things he can remember about the scene. He starts first with his little conversation with Stain, then how he lit off his firework and inadvertently attracted Todoroki’s help. The actual fight is a bit difficult to explain in words, as it was so fast-paced, but Izuku manages.

The entire time, Izuku does pretty good with not saying anything *too* incriminating.

When he explains how they finally defeated Stain, Tsukauchi lets a small smile slip through. “The victory really was impressive, Midoriya. You boys should be proud. Not many pros could have accomplished that in such a short amount of time.”

“All Might could’ve,” Izuku says instinctively.

“He doesn’t count.”

Fair enough.

An issue only arises when Izuku has to talk about how the last Nomu came upon them, and then how Native consequently died. Thankfully, Tsukauchi doesn’t ask any questions during this part, probably having sensed that Izuku wouldn’t be able to fully answer anyway.

He just listens to Izuku talk all the way up until the boy says that he was picked up by the Nomu and had to defeat it.

Izuku tries to leave it at that and go into how Endeavor caught him when he fell, but Tsukauchi isn’t having it.

“And which quirk did you use to defeat the Nomu?”

Izuku blinks, forcing himself not to give a bodily jerk at the words. He hesitates, biting his tongue before his instincts can take over and make him answer with a lie.

Again, he *can’t* lie to Tsukauchi. He won’t be able to get away with it when the man is a literal walking lie detector. He has to be cautious here. He has to *think*.

And God, when was the last time he had to be so on his toes around Tsukauchi? He can’t remember. Which is how he knows this is all on

purpose.

Tsukauchi is waiting for a slip up. He already knows there's more to the story.

Izuku rolls his eyes, irritation clear on his face. "Why does that matter?"

Tsukauchi's gaze lifts from his notepad. He meets Izuku's guarded, emerald eyes with his cool, shining black ones. "I just need you to state the name of it for the record. Your original quirk."

The way his voice changes on the word *original* has Izuku's heart rate skyrocketing. His left hand slowly curls into a fist as the world seems to slow around them until only he and Tsukauchi are spinning out of orbit.

"For what record? You won't be publishing this part to the public, so why bother?"

"Because it's for me," Tsukauchi says, raising a brow. His voice isn't quite stern, but it's getting there. It's a warning if Izuku's ever heard one, and it reminds him of Aizawa. "It's my job to make sure I have everything straight. I need to know all the details, Midoriya."

Do you really?

Izuku's next words are slow and cautious. "I used *Boost* a lot last night. I told you it's almost always active."

Tsukauchi levels him with a stare. "Did you use it on the last Nomu you took down?"

Deep breaths. Come on. Come on. Calm it.

No. The only quirk Izuku used with Tsubasa's Nomu was… *Extract.* That's it. He can't say otherwise or else it'll ping Tsukauchi and give him away. He can't try to find a loophole in the question, either, as Tsukauchi is being very technical about the way he's wording everything.

"I did with most of the Nomu I fought," he says, nodding.

"But not all?"

Shit. Why is he so determined to get this answer? Izuku was right. He's *searching* for something. This doesn't really matter, so the fact

that Tsukauchi is doubling down on it is really telling.

Izuku's panic gives way to frustration. "Are you going to sell this information or something to someone on the black market?"

"Well, I'd have to actually have information first."

The slightly sarcastic tone is all Izuku needs to hear to shut down. "Get it elsewhere then. I'm done."

"Son."

"Can you please *stop calling me th—"*

"I can only help you here. That's what this is for."

Izuku scoffs. "No, that's what you think. That's what you always say, but it's—it's not true. This won't help me. All this has ever done is put everyone in—"

Movement. Izuku sees Tsukauchi's arm move out of the corner of his vision, and since the detective is on Izuku's right, he can't prepare or defend himself easily due to the state his right arm is in. He still can't feel that side, and plus the arm is bundled so tightly in casts that it's useless to him.

It's that knowledge, he thinks, that makes him lash out.

He twists in the bed, contorting in an odd, painful way so that his bandaged left arm is up and poised with One for All running through him as an afterthought, black sparks warring with red as he prepares to defend himself.

Detective Tsukauchi freezes, arm still outstretched from when he was trying to grab the falling water bottle that was sitting on the table. It drops to the ground, and it sounds like a bomb with how silent the rest of the room is.

Oh.

Izuku was shivering, wasn't he? So badly, in fact, that he was rattling the bed and table to the point where the bottle slipped off.

Tsukauchi wasn't going to hit him. He was trying to catch the bottle.

In the back of his mind, somewhere, Izuku knew that. He never doubted it for a second, but his body was still ready for the opposite

to happen.

The detective puts his hands up upon seeing his face, movements slow. “I wasn’t going to touch you,” he says, nonjudgmental.

“I know.” Despite the words, One for All doesn’t let up. “I—I know. I’m…” *Sorry. I’m sorry.*

“No, you *didn’t* know.” Something like hurt passes through his eyes like ships in the sea, but Izuku could just as easily be imagining it. “It’s okay, Midoriya. You’re alright.”

It’s not okay, he thinks. He almost fucking *hit* him. Tsukauchi. He almost decked the man with One for All, right here in this hospital room. What the hell is *wrong* with him?

He must still be on edge. His fight mode is still on from last night, back when flight wasn’t an option.

“That was my fault,” Tsukauchi adds. “You’re still recovering; I shouldn’t have come here to ask questions so soon after everything happened. Nonetheless, you did great. Thank you for what you’ve done so far, Midoriya.” He stands up, as if to leave, and Izuku feels like even more of an ass. He hates how clinical Tsukauchi sounded. How professional.

He’s momentarily taken somewhere far away in his mind, where guilt and shame are busy eating him alive. All of those emotions are back, which means his new empathy quirk has decided to keep fucking with him.

Just perfect.

He should be better than this, shouldn’t he? He’s been trained how to deal with his stupid feelings like this. He’s never almost hurt someone just for feeling overwhelmed—especially when it concerns One for All.

His eyes close, and he tries to tether himself to the earth by focusing on the feeling of the casts wound tight on his scarred skin.

There’s a kind of awkwardness hanging heavy in the air. It really should never be like that with Tsukauchi, not anymore at least, so when the emotions build up and he feels like *crying,* he speaks.

“Yeah,” he says, stopping Tsukauchi in his tracks, who was heading

for the door with his things and saying something about contacting Aizawa. “Yeah, I… I used my original quirk to defeat the last Nomu. After Native, I didn’t, uh, I didn’t feel like I had a choice. In the matter. I…” Izuku swallows again, thinking hard. “I felt that I needed to kill him… er, it.”

It’s not quite what Tsukauchi asked, but the detective accepts it as a response anyway, as he lets out a slow, soft sort of breath. “In that instance… I think it was the right thing to do. No one can blame you for what you did.” His voice drops lower. “I know I can’t.”

He doesn’t question further, but Izuku still doesn’t feel like he won.

Because his evasion? His refusal? It was answer enough. Tsukauchi has reason to believe that more is going on now, so in the future he will no doubt push more. He’s always been stubborn, always been perceptive, and he’s always tried to get to the bottom of things.

Izuku has fucked himself over by using *Extract*.

A few moments of silence passes, and then the man is moving forward, his quirk a steady thrum inside Izuku’s mind. Izuku can feel sadness flowing off of Tsukauchi in waves, and he wonders what’s gotten him so down.

His eyes peel open, and he watches how Tsukauchi reaches out a hand —movements open, slow, and clear in their intent this time—to rest on his head. The weight grounds him, makes him feel miles ahead of everyone else whilst still being in last place, and Izuku hungrily leans into it.

Tsukauchi says something, but he can’t hear or even pay attention anymore.

When the room is finally empty, Izuku’s mind is just as numb as his right arm.

Chapter End Notes

> hey guys just wanted to say thank y’all sm for 500k hits!! I’m flabbergasted rn!! y’all inspire me sm and I’m so glad I’ve got you all here as support!!!
>
> this is a short chap, at around 8k, but I’ll have the next one rlly soon! 😈 I’m more excited about that one

,

moth and flame

Chapter Notes

cw: minor breakdown, unintentional self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He manages to make it into the bathroom before he breaks down completely.

He's lucky he's not attached to any machinery as he was when he first woke up. Instead, the nurses (upon Yamada's insistence) put one of their brand new *portable* vitals monitors inside his arm like a chip. That way Izuku won't have to be stuck in his bed or call someone if he has to piss.

They were still clear about how Izuku is not to strain himself or move around, however. He's in a recovery state, even though he's healing pretty quickly. The doctors, to be fair, aren't even sure why he's been healing so fast—Izuku isn't about to tell them he has a new regeneration quirk, of course, so it's natural for them to be a little cautious.

The chip is only temporary and will be removed before he's released, so there's that to put his mind at ease.

Izuku isn't too worried about it anyway. He watched them put it in, and if he has to take it out himself, he knows where to find knives.

Since he only has one *barely* functioning arm right now, he struggled when he tried to turn the handle to the bathroom. His stiff bandages made it so he couldn't tighten his fingers around it, and it wasn't one of the ones where you could just press down—so, really, the logical thing would've been to call someone for help.

But Izuku would actually rather die than do that. He did what any normal, anxiety-ridden superpowered teen would: he got frustrated, sent a little bit of energy from *Boost* to his fingers, and used his teeth to tear off the bandages on his hand once his fingers flexed enough to rip them.

It took three seconds. And then he was in.

So here he is now, barely able to breathe, wishing the fucking

emotions would *go away*. There are too many of them. He hates it.

He's always pushed away his own feelings, ever since he was little and not allowed to show them. Ever since he had to put on a brave face for his mother and hide the bad stuff inside him. He put all of his feelings on the back burner and never dealt with them until eventually, years later, they all just started smoking and setting off all of the alarms.

And even then, Izuku didn't put out the resulting fires. His building burned down, and he went on to the next place.

If he doesn't even deal with his own emotions, why the hell would he ever want someone else's? What cruel joke is this? Did his father do it on purpose? Was he expecting this to happen?

He stumbles further into the bathroom, staring into the mirror. There's something there along with the foreign feelings. There's something on him, in him, around him. Everywhere.

Past the guilt and fear and anger and sadness—he can feel something. A quirk's first breath. A new beginning.

It's…

A hand lands on his shoulder, but the worst part is that it doesn't. There's nothing there when he snaps his neck around, there's nothing staring back at him in the mirror.

Paranoia worms its way deep inside his stomach, the root of all his problems right now, and it doesn't go away.

Deku?

Izuku hears the voice, young and clouded with horror and regret, but doesn't want to. He doesn't want to even acknowledge it.

He can feel the heavy weight of Tsubasa's wings now and it's almost maddening. The colors around him blur, the shapes distorting as he tries to breathe again. He can't afford to have the chip inside him alerting one of the nurses.

His face is as white as a sheet, the light scars on his face almost completely blending in.

God, he *feels* it. He feels him.

He knows it's supposed to be there, the wings, but it's not. They're not there. It makes sense, really, that he didn't think he'd get the wings—so what is this?

Tsubasa's quirk was a mutant type. He was born with his beautiful wings, albeit smaller versions of them. The quirk factor, which is what Izuku is able to steal using *Extract,* does not include the wings themselves. It's just the ability for Tsubasa to *use* those wings. The factor itself is what connected them to Tsubasa's nerves and brain, allowing him to use them like a regular human limb with ease.

Izuku can't steal the mutant traits, not unless the quirk is transformative, so in this case, just as he suspected, he only stole the part of Tsubasa—no, the—the *Nomu,* that allowed it to use the wings.

His father may be able to steal certain kinds of mutant quirks fully, but Izuku cannot. He wasn't blessed with that ability.

Or maybe he should say cursed.

It's eerily similar to how Aizawa can still erase some aspects of a mutant quirk. For Ojiro, who has a tail that he was born with, his mutant limb will not be taken away when Aizawa activates Erasure. His ability to use the tail and have full mobile control over it, however, will be erased.

And so, Izuku's body still registers Tsubasa's quirk factor. It still registers what it's for, what it does, meaning that to his body the wings are there. The wings *exist.*

It's like a phantom pain that extends from the edges of his spine and shoulder blades a good few feet out into the space behind him. The wings exist, but not physically. They're there, he just can't see them. He can't *use* them.

It's a quirk malfunction that Father used to always complain was one of the few downsides to *Extract.*

"Your quirk is a dud that allows for other duds to be stolen, Izuku. Quite interesting, don't you think?"

"No."

"Oh, don't sound so ashamed. It'll help you in battle. As a last resort, it'll allow you to defeat even the most dangerous of mutants. Not all of them, sure. But even one circumstance is enough to prove it useful."

Izuku turns on the tap and splashes water on his face, but when the cold water doesn't work, when he's trembling so hard the fucking sink itself is rattling and banging against the wall, Izuku looks up again and he swears he can *see* them.

The red, shiny leather makes him sick. The cuts and holes in the wings and the talons on the end of them cause him to fall back. He grabs for the shower curtain but misses and ends up on his ass, back against the door.

His good arm reaches behind him, hand grasping at his hospital shirt —the one he had to bribe a nurse for to replace the shitty gown they had him in originally. He tugs it over his head, and it doesn't catch on anything on the way off. More specifically, it doesn't catch on the wings his body is trying to convince him he has; it just goes.

He throws it across the small room and starts to dig his fingernails into the areas where the wings would protrude from his back if he had them.

They're not there, he doesn't feel anything, but he *does.*

More red catches the corner of his vision, and he whines, his panic making him second guess his own reasoning. His nails scratch at the skin almost comfortingly, reassuring him that the wings are not there. He won't be caught. He won't have to make up some unbelievable, impossible excuse for suddenly having wings resembling those of the Nomu he killed.

He won't have to live with having Tsubasa's own damn limbs on his back for the rest of time. He won't have to lie, won't have to deal with —

The wings weigh him down, making another migraine spring up in his head, spreading from the back of his skull to his temples. Everything hurts, including his left arm. He's using it when he's not supposed to, and it's starting to fight back. He's sore all over, and it makes him almost irrationally angry because he's not even that injured.

That regeneration quirk took care of most of the heavy damage, as it's even better than *Boost's* regenerative factor, but come on! Why is he feeling like this? He doesn't deserve to feel like this. He shouldn't be feeling anything at all because he should be dead right now!

It's a punishment, something tells him, and it sounds like one of the mean voices from the very beginning. He hasn't heard them in a long

time, but he welcomes it back all the same.

He clings to these thoughts, eyes squeezed shut as he tries not to look, tries not to make himself break down even more while everyone else's emotions overtake him.

There's nothing there, there's nothing there, there's nothing.

He's imagining it. All of it.

The extra weight on his back. The phantom pains. The flashes of red. *Tsubasa,* whom he swears he can feel all around him, circling him like a dog would their wounded buddy, voice calling out his name. It's all fake.

He needs it to be.

He doesn't realize he's hiccuping until black spots dot his vision, telling him that if he doesn't fix this now, he's not going to be able to get oxygen in correctly at all. There's a steady, slow stream of liquid flowing down his back from where he's digging his nails into the skin. He's making himself bleed and he can barely feel it.

But—but what if it's not actually because he's breaking the skin? What if he's bleeding because the wings are sprouting? What if he somehow will get the whole quirk? Is he going to open his eyes again and see the same wings that nearly carried him up to the stars?

What if he—

There's someone approaching.

Amidst all the chaos and emotions, Izuku feels something weird. Trepidation, worry, annoyance—it's all mixed into one, and it's fucking *strong* . Whoever must be feeling that is definitely going through a crisis, Izuku knows that for damn sure. The very presence of the person outshines all of the others, and Izuku's scratching stops upon recognizing the quirk of the user.

It's… Erasure? That's who he's sensing? This is *Aizawa?*

There's no way. He can't feel Aizawa! He's never been able to before unless he sees or hears him first. Only then does *Extract* ping his quirk for Izuku to track.

But Erasure has been around Izuku for so long that the boy is certain

of the fact that it can't be a mistake. He knows what Aizawa feels like, and this… this is him.

His quirk lines up with the strong emotions Izuku is sensing, too, which is incredible. He can *feel* him! He's—he's sensing him! Even without already seeing or hearing him!

It's such a weird concept, such an abrupt change in the way Izuku's world spins, that he can't even accept it at first. The revelation has all of the other pointless emotions fading away, and his panic subsides for a moment.

It's because of the empathy quirk, right? Gotta be! He sensed the emotions first, and then *Extract* caught up. If he's right, he's going to implode, and if he's not, well, he'll still implode.

But along with the excitement and shock comes something he is even more familiar with: terror.

Because yeah, Aizawa is here and he can feel him, but also, *Aizawa is here and he can fucking feel him.*

Aizawa has now arrived after hours of radio silence, and his emotions, though usually skillfully hidden, were strong enough to drown out everything else in the entire hospital. Which, if Izuku can scrounge up enough brain cells like one would loose change in a wallet to think more about it, does not mean well for him.

Either way, Aizawa is coming, just like Tsukauchi had, and he's walking fast.

Izuku scrambles to his feet, nearly falling right back on his ass due to his right arm not doing shit to help him. His left arm throbs, burning pain racing through him as the bandages he unraveled from his hand hang down a little more, still wrapped around his forearm and shoulder.

He looks like a wreck, and Yamada wouldn't be happy if he saw him, but Izuku's not thinking of him right now.

All he knows is *Aizawa* and *not wings* and *fear.*

His hand won't grasp the bathroom door handle this time, even as he tries to force it like before. The pain makes him grit his teeth, but no amount of *Boost* makes his mottled fingers cooperate.

There's ringing in his ears, and the lights are too bright. His body won't work, it won't listen to him.

Aizawa's confusion hits Izuku in the face, and the sense of urgency that follows does the same.

He panics trying to get the door open, berating himself for closing it in the first place, but it doesn't matter because then the handle turns by itself and the door wrenches open.

Izuku is left to look like a fool with his trembling hand hanging midair, skin prickling when the cooler air comes into contact with his chest and back.

Aizawa's face contorts in surprise, but the air quickly turns electric when his anger transfers to Izuku. "Midoriya, I was calling you. Why the hell weren't you—" He stops abruptly, doing a double take when he sees the red on the tips of Izuku's fingers. "Are you bleeding?"

Immediate worry leaks into the space between them, and Izuku wonders why the empathy quirk hasn't turned off yet. How did he do it before? He wants it off. He doesn't like this. The knowing.

Aizawa is quick. He grabs Izuku's hand, twisting it so he can see if there are any fresh cuts on the fingers, probably.

"I—I didn't—it's from my back, not—" He hisses, cutting himself off when Aizawa puts a hand on his shoulder and turns him around roughly to see for himself.

Izuku shivers, feeling exposed. He can sense Aizawa's eyes roaming over his back, focusing on the scratches and crescents that litter the areas around his shoulder blades.

"Jesus," Aizawa breathes out. His hands hover over Izuku, but he doesn't touch the marks. Instead, he grabs Izuku again by his better shoulder and pulls him out of the bathroom, directing him back to his hospital bed. "Naomasa only left you for twenty minutes, kid. What's hurting?"

Naomasa? Since when did you start calling him that?

"Midoriya," Aizawa says, voice firm to gain his attention.

"Nothing! It's—it's nothing! My quirk, it's already healing them." His words come out choppy and uneven, making Aizawa's brows furrow.

“I’m okay.”

This earns him a scoff. “Bullshit.”

Izuku is pushed until he’s sitting down, but Aizawa keeps him from leaning back. The man hits a button on the side of the wall, asking for assistance, and Izuku jerks. “Hey, you don’t need to—!”

“Shut it,” Aizawa orders, and Izuku’s nose pinches despite himself.

Ouch, Number Seven says.

He deserves it, another replies, causing voice number five to pipe up immediately.

Do you always have to be so mean?

Oh, come on, I wasn’t meaning it like that! The kid needs firmness right now and you know it!

Seven speaks again. *Yeah, but maybe next time say it when he’s not listening, dipshit.*

The mental door is slammed, and Izuku is cut off from them, solidifying his previous beliefs. This means that not only can they see everything he can and everything he did in the *past,* they can also hear his thoughts and track them. They can decide whether or not they want him to hear them.

They always could.

It’s almost funny, because really they're like little spies in his head. They know more about him than anyone, even his mother. Not even All for One and Auntie and Kacchan are privy to some of his more disturbing memories or thoughts. They probably know more than *AINA* did when she was still alive, and he told her *everything.*

He hates the idea of the voices, sure, but also… maybe it can be nice. Maybe. To have other people in the know.

People who quite literally have no space to judge.

If he… gets *better*… maybe he can actually have normal conversations with them? Maybe he can try to make up, at least a little bit, for what his father did to them. Is that selfish? To want to do that? He doesn’t think so, but then again he can’t be sure.

It would be selfish if they didn't want him to do that, he knows, as he'd be doing it just to make himself feel better at that point, but what if they do?

How would he even know? It's not like he can outright ask them, and even then it would be weird.

What if he just calls a mental emergency meeting or something? He can gather them all around like a council with everyone having a little throne and discuss some things.

Actually, now that he remembers what the mean voice was saying to him before Tsukauchi showed up, he might not want to do that. He doesn't exactly deserve to see them. They didn't choose Izuku—he did. He chose One for All, and they probably had no choice in who the next user was.

He wonders briefly if they're upset by All Might's choice. Do they think he made a mistake? Do they blame him for it?

God, he hopes they don't hate him because of it. It's not All Might's fault that Izuku is a liar—

"Sweetie?"

There's a nurse in front of him. Her eyes are what he focuses on first; they have multiple colors in them and change rapidly. It reminds him of a lava lamp. Her face is pinched in concern, and she has a flashlight in her hand that she uses to shine into his eyes next.

He turns away, blinking rapidly. He doesn't know when she got there or how long she's been talking to him, but judging by her expression and the way Aizawa is bouncing his leg ever so slightly from where he stands off to the side, he figures it's been a few minutes.

Izuku shifts, his awareness coming back to him. There's something sticky on his shoulder blades, and he frowns.

"We fixed up your little scrapes," the nurse explains kindly. "What you're feeling is the fast-healing ointment we put on you to make sure it doesn't bother you. Though it looks like your quirk is doing most of the work."

It is, isn't it? He can't even feel the scratches anymore. His skin sewed it up already. His new quirk is kind of a blessing in disguise. Well, that's one of them at least.

Something else he notices is that he doesn't feel the wings anymore. The cream on his back must be helping with that somehow.

And *bingo.* There's a fix to that specific quirk-related problem of his. He'll just need a lifetime supply of whatever the ointment is and he'll be good to go.

"Even though you have impressive regeneration, Midoriya, it's still important to not strain yourself. It's incredibly irresponsible to not listen to the doctors when they tell you to take it easy. Removing your protective bandages also wasn't a wise thing to do." The nurse is sitting on a stool, currently putting on some new gloves. These ones are green. He thinks the other ones were blue, but it's not like he was paying attention when she was apparently fixing up his back. He was somewhere far away. "I've replaced the bandages you unraveled, but I might as well change the ones on your right arm too. May I?"

She gestures to his arm, a clear question, and Izuku stiffens. He doesn't want anyone touching it, but it's clear that's what she needs to do. It won't hurt him, obviously, he's not even worried about that, but what if she decides to do something else? What if she's secretly a villain and is going to cut his entire arm off? What if she has a quirk that'll harm her if she touches that specific arm of his?

His theories are outlandish and frankly stupid, but he can't help them all the same.

Because the fact of the matter is that this is a medical professional, practically a doctor, and he doesn't like that. He never will.

He glances at Aizawa, eyes wild, but the man is just watching them and makes no move to help.

Izuku, after a few moments of awkward hesitation, nods his head. "Yeah," he says hoarsely.

He watches like a hawk as she carefully takes his palm into her own and starts to cut at the cast to get to the bandages. She takes them off slowly, revealing splotchy, uneven skin. His arm is dark and seemingly layered with bruises not yet healed.

He must've been in terrible shape for them to not be gone already. Either that or his new regeneration quirk picks and chooses what it heals.

All of the hair on his arm has been burned off, and there are so many

tiny scars and scratches that it looks like someone was playing Connect the Dots with his freckles. At the top of his arm, near his shoulder, there are deep, wide puncture marks. Izuku remembers them from when the Moth Nomu nearly took off his arm entirely with its jaws. He was *lucky* it only left him mangled.

He shouldn't have been consistently using One for All and his other quirks afterwards when his arms were already in such a bad state, but did he really have a choice then?

Izuku looks away, unable to look at himself anymore. *What's a few more ugly additions to my body?*

"Can you feel this?" The nurse asks, and Izuku doesn't even bother looking at what she's doing even though his senses are screaming at him.

"Just the, uh, the pressure. Besides that, no. I can't… I can't feel anything."

She hums. "What about now?"

He squeezes his eyes shut. Heavy rain pounds on the window, and thunder rumbles nearby; the storm has arrived. "No."

"Over here?"

The pressure moves, and his arm tingles at the touch. Despite this, no other sensation or pain comes. He shakes his head.

Her fingers brush over his shoulder and ghost towards his neck. "What about here?"

"Yeah. I feel it there." He watches trees whip around in the wind. "It stops at, uh, the trapezius, I think."

She nods in response. "That would make sense. You've damaged your nerves pretty badly with the amount of force you exerted upon using your enhancements. That, plus the placement of the bite you received from one of those creatures, didn't do you any favors this time. For power types, this outcome is unfortunately not uncommon after years of heroic work, though why this is happening so soon to you as a first year student is still a mystery to us."

Izuku has already heard this. The doctor explained it to him when he was with Yamada. He doesn't feel like hearing it all over again but

also doesn't want to tell her to stop, as she's just doing her job.

Aizawa steps closer to get a better look, and Izuku wants to pull his arm back. "Will it go away?"

The nurse sighs softly and begins to carefully rewrap Izuku's arm with clean bandages. "I'm not his doctor, but I can tell you what I know from past experience, Mr. Midoriya. In these—"

"It's Aizawa," Izuku corrects before he can stop himself.

The silence that follows is deafening. Both Aizawa and the nurse look at him, and Izuku turns from the window to stare at the two of them, burning underneath their gazes. "Sorry. He's just not, uh…"

Aizawa is not *Mr. Midoriya.* Not even close to it. He probably doesn't want to be referred to as such, either.

The nurse takes it in stride and flashes the man a quick look. "My apologies, Mr. Aizawa. As I was saying, in these kinds of cases, especially with how young Midoriya here is, there really is no way of knowing just yet."

Izuku pointedly ignores the way Aizawa is looking at him now.

"Mr. Aizawa, do you know what peripheral neuropathy is?"

"I've heard of it," Aizawa responds, arms folded. Izuku doesn't know how he didn't notice it before, but the man is wearing his capture weapon around his neck even though he has casual clothes on. He's wearing black jeans and a plain sweater, and his hair is frizzy and pulled back in a half-bun.

Izuku wonders where he was before he came here. He obviously didn't have time to put on his hero costume.

"It's a result of damage to the nerves located outside of the brain and spinal cord, called your peripheral nerves. This kind of damage often causes weakness, numbness, and pain, usually in the hands and feet. In some cases it can even extend up to your legs or arms, which is what we're seeing here." Her head tips to the side as she finishes taping down the bandages. "It can also affect digestion, urination, and circulation, but from what we've monitored so far, he's normal in those areas."

"And we're sure the cause of it is his injuries?"

Izuku feels irritation in Aizawa, and he doesn't enjoy it. The nurse, however, is the epitome of calm and collected. Her emotions are tightly contained. "There are a number of causes of peripheral neuropathy, and it's not always as severe as this. Autoimmune diseases, diabetes, alcoholism, bone marrow disorders, vitamin deficiencies—you name it. All of these could cause it. But, given the situation and what the doctors found, yes, the injuries he sustained and the continuous pressure on the nerves seems to be the main cause."

"Exposure to poisons," Izuku adds in a whisper before he can stop himself, remembering the medicinal class he was taking online a few months back.

"That can also be a cause," she concedes. "However, we determined this morning that the Nomu that attacked you did not have the toxic substances in its venom needed to do this kind of damage."

Tsukauchi must have brought them samples to test.

"This condition is chronic, Mr. Aizawa. It could last for years, or be lifelong. There are bad days and good days, I say. The feeling in his right hand and arm may return fully, not at all, or by only a little. If it does fully return, there may still be moments where he feels the pins and needles. Or, the feeling may return but then leave permanently after a few months. As I said, there's no way to tell until it happens."

Aizawa is quiet for a few more moments, taking all of the information in. "I was told it's treatable."

Izuku almost laughs outright at the words but stops himself, turning his focus back to the window. He wishes he could see Missy right now. Iida and Todoroki, too.

"Treatment can help, sure, but it's not curable. We've already been giving him the medications needed to stop the burning and the stabbing pains, which are other common symptoms. It'll help prevent the condition from getting worse. If we don't take these steps, infection is imminent, which would force us to amputate."

Amputate. *Amputate.*

Aizawa sucks in a sharp breath. "So he takes the medication forever?"

"He'll have to take it for however long his body tells him to," she says simply. "The medication will mostly be for the nerve pain.

Antidepressants may be issued to help with regulation, along with some generic pain relievers like oxycodone. Anti-seizure pills would be a last resort, but pain-relieving creams are a must, similar to the kind I just used on his back."

Well, at least Izuku is getting the pain cream he wanted! This is a win in his book!

Sort of. Maybe. Okay, maybe not fully.

The nurse goes into detail about the symptoms he'll likely still experience and the problems he'll face, but Izuku doesn't pay it any mind. The topic moves on to the other injuries the surgeons had to take care of, like the slices on his stomach and the burns all over him.

She even mentions the remains of the epinephrine found in his system, making a point to tell Izuku how irresponsible it was (again) to not go directly to a hospital after being given the adrenaline.

This comment prompts Aizawa to give Izuku a *look,* which tells the boy that, yeah, they *will* be discussing that bit of information later on.

Perfect.

The nurse leaves soon after, practically threatening Izuku to not mess with his bandages again. He was given another shirt, too, reminding Izuku that he was indeed shirtless and just forgot in the midst of his panic. Granted, he was still mostly covered in bandages, but the embarrassment remains.

The storm is raging outside by then, and it sounds almost as bad as a typhoon. It's comforting to Izuku. The rain pounding against the window and outer walls scratches his brain just right.

And also distracts him from the elephant in the room.

Aizawa is there, quietly reading a book and making notations in red and black pens. He checks his phone like clockwork and then goes back to reading as if he's on a deadline of sorts.

Izuku watches the television and spaces out, trying to push the limits of his empathy quirk whilst also trying to ignore literally everything else.

The channel was turned by Aizawa, thankfully, so a stupid kids' cartoon is playing instead of those awful news channels. Izuku isn't

going to admit he likes it, though.

Despite his attempts to ignore them, he still finds himself clinging to whatever emotions Aizawa exudes every few minutes. His mood changes on a whim, apparently, and it's interesting to Izuku to study. He always thought Aizawa only had a few emotions, a limited range, but he now realizes he was dead wrong.

Aizawa feels *everything,* just at different frequencies and levels. And he's a master at hiding it.

Izuku's stomach coils up tight again. He wonders how many times he's completely misinterpreted some of Aizawa's actions or words because of this misconception. How many times has he thought one of his faces meant something different? Has he been unfairly judging him on some occasions? Is it frustrating to Aizawa when his emotions are incorrectly inferred?

God, no wonder he seems sick of Izuku.

"Stop upsetting yourself," Aizawa says abruptly, not looking at him.

Izuku jumps. That's the first thing he's said in a while. The last time he talked was to tell Izuku to *quit moving around and rest.*

He wants to ask how the man knew he was working himself up but refrains from doing so. He likes to think he's also pretty good at hiding his emotions, but maybe he's wrong about that too.

Has that always been the case?

He then remembers what he asked Yamada a few hours prior to Aizawa showing up, and his anxiety returns.

"He hasn't come to see me yet. I know he's busy, I know that, but he hasn't even called. He always calls." Izuku wriggles around in his spot, trying to calm his nerves. "Is he angry?"

Yamada softens even more if that's possible. "Midoriya, I think he cares very deeply about a lot of things, and what happened last night… It scared him. It scared us all. When we got the notification that your wristband was destroyed and we saw what was happening in Hosu, we thought the worst. But that part isn't your fault, ya know? I think he's more worried than angry, kiddo."

"Okay," Izuku whispers, though he doesn't quite believe it.

And here, with Aizawa here and alive in the seat next to his hospital bed, just as he was when Izuku's building went up in flames, Izuku believes it even less.

He swallows, gathering up every last ounce of his courage. "You're mad at me."

"I'm mad at a lot of things."

It's not a confirmation, really, but Izuku doesn't need it to be. "But you're not talking as much as you normally do. Even when you're mad you usually talk more than this."

Aizawa gives a dry snort in reply. "There's not much to talk about. And forgive me but I'm not exactly in the talking mood."

"I know. I just meant that you're… you're trying to be nice. To me. So you don't…" Izuku struggles to find the right words. "Blow up."

Aizawa glances over at him. His expression is guarded, but his emotions betray him. "What makes you say that?"

"Your jaw is clenched. You've been on the same page for six minutes, even though it only takes you three on average to turn to the next after notating. You keep glancing at me every other minute, as if expecting me to do something. You haven't yelled at me once even though I know you'd like to—"

"I don't *like* yelling at you." His voice is tense, bordering on annoyed. Izuku is poking at a sleeping bear. "Is that what you think I'm here to do?"

"Well, you do it a lot anyway so I just assumed—"

The book closes with a snap. *"Midoriya."*

"I—I'm just saying! I know I messed up, and you have every right to be—to be angry at me, but usually you wouldn't even hesitate to tell me what I did wrong or to scold me or whatever, so I don't know why you're—you're so *quiet.* I don't like it."

Aizawa's eye twitches. "I'm quiet because I'm trying to save you some dignity, kid, so just sit back and rest so we can get you out of here as quickly as we can. Then we'll *talk."*

Izuku's heart rate spikes, and it takes more courage to admit these

next words than it did to take the Nomu's quirk. "I don't like waiting when I'm—I'm in trouble. It makes me nervous and paranoid—"

"Do you really want to do this now?"

The rest of his sentence dies before it can leave his mouth. He looks away, eyes burning, and the scar on his jaw prickles. He wishes he could soothe it.

"Alright, fine." Aizawa must take his silence as a good enough answer, as he sets his book on the table. "We can start with the fact that you brought your Rabbit costume with you to the internship, which should not have even happened saying as you promised Hizashi you would leave it at home."

"I didn't promise," Izuku corrects, though his voice is weak. "I—I just said I wouldn't bring it, I didn't promise."

Aizawa is thoroughly unimpressed, his words tight when he responds just as quickly. "So lying to Hizashi is okay? Going behind our backs is okay?"

Izuku squirms. *Okay, maybe I should've sucked it up and waited. I'm not ready for this.*

When will he ever be ready for a conversation like this, though? No one ever is.

"No." His breath shudders. "It's not okay. I only brought it because I had a feeling something would go wrong, and—and I was right! It was just a precaution. That's all it ever was, 'Zawa. A failsafe."

"This whole thing—this internship with Gran—was for *Deku,* not Rabbit. It was for heroics, Midoriya, not your silly little vigilantism."

Izuku's left hand twitches. It shakes by his side. "Silly? How is it—no, this isn't even about Rabbit! He's just a tool that allows me to do certain things that Deku can't! I don't know how you—"

Aizawa cuts him off. "You say allow as if it's legal, which it's very much not."

"I know that!" Izuku snaps, his exhaustion and guilt making him frustrated. "I just meant that—!"

"There's nothing Rabbit can do that Deku can't." Aizawa's tone is

final, and with his arms crossed and feet planted firmly on the ground before him, it doesn't look like he's going to budge either.

Immediately, it pisses Izuku off.

"Are you being this dense on purpose or something?" He hisses before he can think better of it, and Aizawa's eyes flash, his next response quick.

"I'll give you a few seconds to rethink what you just said, kid."

Izuku's face darkens, and he has to bite his tongue hard to stop a few choice words from escaping.

He hates this. He can't even walk away here like he'd usually do during an argument at the apartment. He can't run back to the guest room or seek protection with Yamada, he can't do anything like that.

He's just stuck sitting here, arms feeling nonexistent but also so, so fucking heavy, to listen to what Aizawa is telling him.

But maybe that's why the man waited hours to see him. He let Yamada see him first. He let the blond get his own feelings out of the way and let Tsukauchi come around to ask his questions and talk with him, and only then did he decide to come back from his 'cleanup.'

He did this on purpose, didn't he? He waited until Izuku was already at a low point. Maybe he thought this kind of situation wouldn't have happened if he did that. Maybe he thought Izuku wouldn't argue with him. Well, Izuku is currently proving him wrong.

Aizawa must see the look on his face, because then he sighs and leans back a little, eyes closing as the air leaves him. "I didn't want to talk about this now, Midoriya, but now that we are, we might as well finish it. I also didn't want to corner you here, but this is the only time where you'll have to actually listen to me. I'm not…" He struggles on his next sentence. "I'm not trying to make you feel like shit. I'm not trying to lecture you. I just need you to understand that this stuff," he says, gesturing to Izuku's casts and to the hospital in general, "can be avoided more times than not. It *should've* been avoided."

Izuku stares hard at the ceiling. It's a popcorn ceiling. It looks ugly. "It's not like I was trying for this outcome," he mumbles.

"Didn't say you were. But someone's ignorance is still ultimately their fault, and they have to deal with those consequences." Aizawa shifts

to try and catch his eye. “Do you understand that? Because it doesn’t seem like you do, not to me or to anyone else, and that’s a problem. *The* problem. That goes into your safety, into *your* well-being. It’s important that you see your mistakes and fix them so they won’t end up hurting you again.”

Izuku shakes his head and lifts his knees to his chest, staring at the sunflowers in the corner of the room, courtesy of All Might (according to Yamada), as if they’ve wronged him somehow. “I don’t care.”

“Excuse me?”

“I—I didn’t care,” he corrects hastily, blinking to get rid of the stinging in his eyes. He’d ask for some of Aizawa’s eye drops but somehow he doesn’t think this is an appropriate time. Especially saying as Aizawa himself would probably have to help put them in since Izuku’s hands aren’t supposed to be doing anything strenuous.

And that… that would be too close for Izuku’s liking. He doesn’t want to see Aizawa’s face like that now. Doesn’t want to see what may be waiting there.

“When I… when I was out there fighting, I—I didn’t care about my safety. How could I?” He tries to shrug, but because of his stiff arms it looks more like a twitch. “Sir, people were dying. There wasn’t any time to think. There wasn’t any time to—to be rational or whatever. I know I could’ve done better, I know that, but I just had to—”

“It’s not about you doing better. It’s about you learning when to quit. It’s about you learning how to listen to orders for once in your damn life,” Aizawa says. That impatience is coming back, and it’s coming back fast. “Gran Torino told me how he ordered you to stay back on that train, and you didn’t listen. You didn’t even hesitate to disobey him, did you? You don’t follow orders, Midoriya. How are heroes supposed to trust you in the field if you don’t follow orders? How am *I* supposed to trust you?”

Did you ever? Izuku thinks bitterly, but he pushes that unfair thought aside.

Instead, he ignores the interruption entirely and keeps going, following the script he’s been making up on the spot so he won’t break down. “I had to do something. I had to try, at least, to help. There were six Nomu, Aizawa. Six. Was I supposed to let that go? To leave? Was I supposed to leave all those civilians behind?”

“If you were so determined to help, there were evacuation teams all around that you could have joined instead of throwing yourself out there like bait—”

“Really? That’s your solution? So—so was I supposed to just ignore all the Nomu I came across that were terrorizing the civilians? What was I supposed to say? *Oh, sorry, guys, I can’t help you out right now. You see that big scary monster? Yeah, I’m not allowed to fight that. Good luck, though! I’m sure some other hero will get here in time to—”*

“If you’d have used the panic button like you were supposed to, heroes would’ve been sent to your side in less than two mi—”

“I forgot!” Izuku snaps, sick and tired of hearing that be brought up again. “I forgot it was there, okay? You’re acting like I just—like I ignored it on purpose to—to get back at you or something—”

“Don’t even start with that,” Aizawa warns, eyes flaring red. “And really? You just forgot? I'm supposed to believe that?”

Yamada believed it, maybe because I wasn’t lying!

Izuku’s face goes blank. “No. I was saying all that for funsies.”

Aizawa’s hair begins to float at the ends. “Would it kill you to be serious for one conversation?”

Izuku feels his teacher’s anger and feeds on it, his own guilt and irritation building up to form one ugly mess of emotions. “I *am* serious, sensei.”

“What would have happened if Gran wasn’t able to convince Endeavor to let go of you? What if he decided to unmask you right there? You were a vigilante intervening with a statewide crisis, kid. You were in the presence of the *Hero Killer.* That alone should have secured your spot in prison with Endeavor’s name on the rewards spot.”

Izuku, at that moment, when he was barely conscious and being held by Endeavor, honestly didn’t care. He already failed then. He fucked up his body even though he promised All Might he’d try harder to do better. He dragged Todoroki into this mess without meaning to with his fireworks. He let them both know his identity. And he… he… he let that Nomu get to Native.

He wasn’t fast enough, smart enough, or brave enough to be the hero he always wanted to be.

But he doesn't have the words to describe how he's feeling to Aizawa right now, so he simply turns away again and looks out of the dark window.

He goes back to the one phrase he can always fall back on without fail. "I don't care."

The country already hates Rabbit. The news blames him for Native's end, and there are now hundreds of misconstrued stories out there that will never be fully disproven.

"You're going to care, kid, because this?" He stands up, reaches down, and picks up the brown paper bag that Yamada hid under the chair. Izuku knows it contains his dry cleaned Rabbit costume. "It's over. You're through."

There's a wall around Izuku's mind and heart. Always has been. Later on, if you ask him, Izuku will tell you that this is probably when the first crack happened. "What?"

"You're. *Done."*

Izuku laughs disbelievingly, but it hurts his throat and makes him descend into a coughing fit. "You're… taking it away from me?" He asks when he's gathered himself again.

Aizawa sounds icy. "I'm shutting you down."

Blood rushes to Izuku's ears, pounding so loud that it nearly drowns out everything else. For a second there he's about to ask if he's actually serious or if this is some very late April Fool's prank, but then he searches through Aizawa's feelings and motives and finds no trace of humor or deception.

There's just anger and sharpness and *authority*.

Aizawa is dead serious. He's not lying, at least not that Izuku can tell, and he's not backing down.

Like a small flame that's been doused in gasoline, Izuku's own *blinding* rage overtakes him. It's all consuming. His insides are itching, screaming, and burning, clawing at him to escape. Faintly, he feels Aizawa's own walls, and it's clear that they're both burning and feeding off of each other.

It'll be a never ending cycle.

It feels, somehow, sickeningly good. The fight. The standoff. He's always wanted this, really. Aizawa's undivided attention. He's wanted to be able to talk to the man one on one like this, he's wanted to be able to say anything and everything he ever wanted to him and get away with it because they'd *both* be doing it to each other.

He's always needed a 'heart-to-heart' conversation despite his outward disgust and awkwardness at the mere thought of one.

His wishes, however, have been granted in the most fucked up way possible, and now his teacher—his mentor, his goddamn lifeline—is right here in front of him, spewing absolute shit, and Izuku is exhausted and done with not being heard or seen by the person who he wishes the most would treat him like anything other than a misbehaving puppy whenever he messes up.

Because once upon a time Aizawa *did* do that. On their patrols, on those nights they shared on those rooftops—Aizawa didn't control him, he was never overbearing, he was almost always mindful and yet blunt, and with every fucking smoothie and sandwich they had, Izuku felt seen.

He felt like something other than just himself. And it's a weird feeling to describe, really, but all Izuku knows is that feeling has been gradually fading away ever since he started living under Aizawa and Yamada's roof, and he isn't going to point fingers or blame or be ungrateful, but come on.

It's not fair. He didn't *want* that change! He didn't want to be leashed or swept under the rug by some n- *nosy* adults who apparently have nothing better to do than take care of him and fix him—as if he wasn't taking care of himself just fine without them.

Aizawa never tried to control him too much during patrol because he knew Izuku would walk away and shut him out. He knew Izuku had that power. But of course it's different now. Of course that's been changing in a time where Izuku doesn't have that power. Because if he tries to leave or shut him out like he would've back then, he will have nowhere to go. Izuku will be stuck. He will be trapped.

And Aizawa knows that. He knows it and is using that to his advantage.

It's insulting. It's betraying. And Izuku feels stupid for not taking this realization more seriously the moment he first had it back when he was barred from leaving Aizawa's apartment.

That should've been the first red flag. He became too comfortable, didn't he?

Izuku kicks his sore legs off the bed and tries to stand, nearly falling right over once his feet hit the ground. He rights himself just in time though and shakily stalks up to the absolute bastard in front of him. "Why did you ever bother taking me in?" Izuku asks hotly, voice cracking hard as he steps closer, because it doesn't matter that it's only Aizawa Shouta here—his caregiver, his stand-in guardian for Nezu, really—and not Eraserhead the pro hero, as the man still has the power to draw him in like a moth to a flame in any form, intriguing and dangerous and destructive.

He hates it. Izuku, right here, hates it all.

Izuku pauses, chest constricting with lack of oxygen or excess of something else flowing through his veins. "If I knew it was going to be like this, I would've asked you to just leave me in my building that night to burn with everything else I had. I would've been better off!"

It aches. The not-truth. It burns as it spills from his mouth, and as a result it sounds breathy and resigned and so, so damaged.

Aizawa's jaw is set. His eyes, usually so invested and comforting and warm, are sharp like flint. "You wanted me to leave you? Okay. That's fine. The next time some shit like that happens to you, I won't help. I'll do exactly as you said and leave your ass behind. Is that what you want? To be left alone?"

Ninth.

Izuku shuts the first voice out and continues on. "Did it really take you over a year to figure that out?"

"If you made up your mind once in a while, I wouldn't be left guessing."

Izuku bristles at the implication. "I *never* wanted to be trapped like this. Did you think me avoiding you all those times on patrol at the very beginning was just for fun?" He doesn't wait for an answer. His exhaustion and the drugs pumping through him are making him talk more openly than he ever would've in a sober state of mind. "You know, you're the complete *opposite* of him sometimes!"

Aizawa just rolls his eyes at what he probably thinks is a poor attempt at a topic change. "Oh, really? Who?"

“Nobody to you,” Izuku says through gritted teeth, not making sense anymore. “It’s just funny because I usually get reminded of him all the time when I’m around you, but *now* you’re just—you’re not even close to him! You’re so frustrating.”

“Like your father? Is that what you mean?”

Something like trepidation comes from Aizawa while he says the words, and Izuku jolts, momentarily brought out of his anger. “No! Shit, that’s not even—no! Not him. I meant… it’s just someone who used to take care of me. It doesn’t matter anymore.” When Aizawa still doesn’t look convinced and starts to look more concerned than angry, Izuku turns on him again, hating how Aizawa seems to want to back down now, *after* Izuku has already started spilling his guts. “And that’s another thing! Why are you so obsessed with my dad! It’s none of your business who he is or what he’s done to me, and you *know* it!”

Aizawa’s lips are set in a thin line. “We’re not discussing him right now.”

“But you brought him up!” Izuku can’t think correctly anymore, not as he pushes past the line his subconscious set for himself years ago, even before meeting the man here in front of him. “God, you’re so fucking annoying! I don’t need you to lecture me. I know I screwed up last night—I *know.* But you don’t get to treat me as if I—as if I can’t even take care of myself! Not after everything!”

“I don’t care what you have to say.” His words are harsh. Tight. “You are *not* expendable, Midoriya Izuku, and until you can get that through that thick head of yours, you’re benched from everything. Rabbit is done, and you have no say in it. You *never* should’ve had a say. That was my mistake before, and I’m rectifying it now, kid.”

“You act like this is gonna help me or something, but it’s not.” Izuku hiccups, and it frustrates him more, making him want to just throw whatever’s closest to him at the man’s stupid face. “Go right ahead and fix your *mistake,* Aizawa. Do it. Just try and stop me for good.”

He will keep running. He will keep finding loopholes. Izuku’s days are numbered, his life is limited, so he’s not going to waste them in a prison. He’s not going to be locked up or controlled.

This? Aizawa and Yamada? Izuku knew it was never going to be permanent. He always knew it was too good to be true.

But deep down? He doesn’t blame them. It’s not that they’ve done

something wrong—it's just that Izuku is everything *bad* and they're everything that's right.

"Go ahead, throw your fit, kid. You believe whatever your teenage brain wants." Aizawa drops the bag and clenches his hands into fists. Izuku flinches at the sight but recovers quickly. "Keep destroying yourself. Keep the past in the past, whatever you decide." There's fire in his eyes, and this time Izuku shrinks back from the heat. "Because the next time something like this happens, you won't end up in a hospital. You won't get that privilege. You'll be six feet under." He pauses, as if to let the words sink in. "I'm not going to sit here and let you act like this. I won't be helping you kill yourself anymore."

Izuku jerks, and there's another crack. "That's not what I'm—"

"I don't care what you think it is you're doing. You're fooling yourself." Aizawa points to the bed, and Izuku starts to back towards it until he remembers that he's supposed to be disobeying right now. He's shaking again, torn between multiple sides. "I'm not going to continue arguing when you're like this. Eat your food the next time they bring it. I don't want to hear that you've refused it."

He heads for the door, and something sharp pierces Izuku's heart. "So that's it? You're—you're just gonna leave?"

Aizawa glances back. "I have to finish cleaning up what happened back there. I also have meetings to attend." His expression darkens again when he sees Izuku scoff. "Trust me, kid, I don't want to go any more than you want to be in those casts. Deal with it."

Izuku buzzes with unreleased rage. Aizawa isn't *listening to* him. He never does. He never hears him. Why is he being so unfair? Why can't he just let some things be?

So what if Izuku is reckless? He's not suicidal. He's not actively looking for that kind of end. He's always going to put everyone else before him simply because he *deserves* that. That's what he is supposed to do. He is supposed to be the exact opposite of his father if he is to help the world.

He doesn't mind it! It's just the way things are. He has to be of *use* to others.

Aizawa won't understand, and it's really not his fault, but Izuku can't help the next words from coming out, because the voices are back and the red is teasing him at the corners of the room and everything is too

suffocating.

“God, I hate you so fucking much.”

He whispers it and winces immediately after he says it, not really meaning for Aizawa to hear him. Izuku’s lips part as if to retract it, to take it back, but the moment of opportunity leaves and he keeps quiet.

Aizawa must have heard it, as he pauses with his hand on the handle, but he doesn’t comment on it. And Izuku *knows* it’s childish, but he still doesn’t take the words back even as the regret sits like ash in his throat.

“Hizashi will be here soon,” is all Aizawa says, and then the door shuts behind him. He’s gone just as quickly as he arrived.

Like shutters being put on windows before a hurricane, Aizawa’s emotions are abruptly cut off from Izuku, snapping their invisible connection.

It was something that Izuku didn’t even know they had until it was gone, and the absence of it leaves him empty and so, so alone.

Chapter End Notes

tensions between the father and son are the hardest to cut

i was listening to this song on yt when I wrote the Aizawa scene. not sure if I’ve rec’d it before but !!

Izuku: I need this fight rn
Aizawa, trying to peacefully read a book: ok
Izuku:
Izuku: wait no

n

the love that remains

Chapter Notes

> dad… content? maybe. who knows. mic's bday recently passed so happy bday to present mic!
>
> and happy late bday Izuku! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku holds a pillow in his left hand, staring straight ahead of him. The cotton that was inside of it is now spread out before him—on the floor, the table, his lap, the sheets, everywhere.

It happened fast. He didn't do it on purpose.

He was pressing it harshly up to his face, trying to hide from the world and the unwanted emotions swimming around him, when suddenly the fabric was ripping and cotton was flying in every which way. It's as if they were impatient little clouds needing to scatter after being freed. It was annoying and humiliating, yet well-deserved all the same.

If Izuku had better control over himself, half of this shit wouldn't be happening. *That* wouldn't have happened.

After the pillow broke, though, the universe went quiet. To Izuku, it—

Broke? Izuku laughs silently to himself. *Is that even the right word? I tore it up. You can't… break a pillow. It's not something you can break, it's something you ruin.*

His left hand throbs. His scars itch. His right arm stays numb. It's a new system he doesn't want to get used to, but he knows he might have to.

It's going to hurt to pick up all the cotton. He slides off the bed to start doing it anyway and winces, body protesting. A nurse came in right after Aizawa left to give him more fluids and to explain to him what he should expect in the next couple of days. She had this look on her face that told Izuku she could hear exactly what was happening between him and Aizawa prior to his departure.

She wasn't pitying him, no. But there was something else there.

Something soft.

Whatever it was, Izuku is glad she didn't say anything about it. He was already embarrassed knowing someone else might have overheard the argument.

(He's also grateful that the nurses over here aren't snitches. Maybe not *all* medical professionals are bad…)

Anyway, he's going to have to apologize to her when he next sees her. He ruined the damn pillow, and he hopes UA won't have to pay for it. He's already done enough damage.

Pull comes to the tips of his fingers so he doesn't have to strain himself so much. The cotton shakes, floats up, and presses against his left palm. He releases the connection and does it again and again, panting, until everything is off the floor and on his lap.

It's slow, it's annoying, and Izuku can barely keep a good hold on Pull the entire time, but it works.

The hard part comes when he has to push the cotton back inside the hole in the pillow. Izuku forms the masses into little pieces about the size of golf balls and carefully pops them inside. It's so draining that he has to stop for water a few times in the middle of it. Eventually, the pillow is back to being its regular self, albeit a little more lumpy and disfigured than before.

"Heh. Kind of like me, right?"

Is that rhetorical? Number one asks, making Izuku sigh and drop Pull completely. He stares hard at the pillow.

"Yes."

Regardless, I agree with your statement.

"Thank you. I think I would've lost a lot of sleep tonight if you didn't just tell me that."

You get more sarcastic the more you're injured, Ninth. It's a good defense mechanism, and I'm sure it's served you well over the years, but I wouldn't always fall back on it. It pushes people away.

Izuku closes his eyes, focusing on the voice. He tries to visualize the sound he's hearing all around him. If he can grasp the root of it with

his mind, maybe he can yank it out of its socket like a plug. If they can shut him out, he should be able to do the same thing to them. He wants to shut them up permanently.

I know that's your intention, but it's still worth noting. You'll only hurt yourself if you keep thinking you have to be strong. Let some of the people around you in, Izuku, and you'll see what I'm talking about.

Izuku can visualize it, but only faintly. He sees white, green, and a little bit of red. It's a nice color scheme, he thinks, which makes him hate the idea of it even more.

He wants to snap at the voice and ask why they think they get to call him *Izuku,* but he loses the nerve almost immediately.

First has always been kind. He doesn't come out often, but his presence is always there, always surrounding Izuku— *engulfing* him. But weirdly enough it's not overbearing like Fifth can be sometimes, or ominous like how Second is. It just exists.

And Izuku doesn't feel like going against First. He doesn't know what it is, but his body just physically seems incapable of doing it.

He gives the voices the numbers based on how they feel to him and how often they speak, but now that he's thinking about it, it's like the numbers were already there for him to begin with, waiting to be used. Like a predetermined ticket at a deli.

If that's the case, does that mean First is someone he… should know? Would he be correct in assuming that?

Would First be…?

The cup of water balancing on Izuku's knee falls when the boy subconsciously shifts himself. It tips, pouring the rest of the water over the hospital blanket. It's not a lot, to be fair, but it still makes Izuku groan inwardly.

If he fucks up anything else, he's going to make a new personal record!

Izuku moves his legs and slides off the bed, limbs feeling like jelly. He doesn't bother with picking up the cup or calling for a new blanket. Instead, he makes it to the window and presses his forehead against it, relishing in the coolness of it. It's electric.

The storm is still going strong outside, and he likes the feeling of the rain hitting the glass and making it vibrate. It's helping Izuku redirect his thoughts to the *not-bad,* as Yamada likes to call it.

The not-bad is where Izuku holds his good memories and feelings. Specifically his accomplishments and proudest moments. It can be a small accomplishment like that one time he opened a pickle jar on his first try, or it can be a more important one like that time when he successfully dismantled a toxic fostering system during one of his first real missions as Rabbit.

Either way, the not-bad is supposed to be filled with happy thoughts that can work to bring him into a better mood, or to help him escape a quickly forming bad one. It's something that Yamada told him about the morning of the parent-teacher conferences, probably in hopes that Izuku would stop stressing so much over it.

Izuku was skeptical at first, but it does actually work. Most of the time, that is.

It's just that Izuku is almost always thinking of dark things. He's always a few wrong steps away from some kind of breakdown, so this method isn't exactly concrete.

There's only so many times he can use it in one time frame before it doesn't work for him.

Besides, there are *countless* days in a month where Izuku will start to feel himself sinking into what seems like an abyss of despair, probably due to years of being ostracized and condemned by his peers. Even though his teachers and newfound friends have been helping, Izuku still has a tendency to take things too hard, and what happened at Hosu was just one colossal fuck up.

He feels wretched and useless, and not even the *not-bad* can help him this time.

When he can feel every strike of lightning in his bones before he sees the flashes, Izuku figures it's time to leave. It'll be easier to disappear in a storm like this. He's done it before.

Izuku has been stewing over it for a few days now, though. Thinking over it. That's where this time differs from back then.

He isn't going to hesitate or feel bad about it this time around.

Izuku makes his way around the bed, bending over with a grunt and placing his left hand on the wall to stabilize himself, and picks up the bag containing his Rabbit costume. It's a good thing Aizawa left it with him. It wouldn't have made a difference if he kept it, as the costume isn't what makes Rabbit, but Izuku is still grateful.

He picks up the cup then puts it in the trash can. He's not in a hurry, so he's going to take the time to clean up before he goes. Yamada shouldn't be back for a bit.

Izuku very slowly makes his bed, folding the damp blanket as best he can and spreading it out over the foot of it. He figures he can make it a few miles away from the hospital before taking the time to cut out the chip in his arm. With only one hand it'll be difficult to do it, but he can manage. This isn't the worst he's had before, and it certainly won't be the last big injury he'll ever receive.

His hero costume was also dropped off with him after Gran picked it up, but most of it is ripped and fried, so it's not wearable. Izuku will bring it with him just to salvage some materials. He's not one to let something go to waste.

He has his charger along with his phone, but he'll need to get rid of the trackers on both of the items before getting too far. If he remembers correctly, he has a really old safe house a few blocks from here. Whether or not it's still there or, well, safe, is another question entirely. Either way, it's worth a shot at checking out. He can lay low for a bit there and recuperate.

Izuku, after a moment's deliberation, takes the extra pair of hospital clothes the nurse left him in the closet and stuffs them in his bag with his costumes.

Soon, the room is neat and close to the way it probably looked before he was even transported to it. He has everything packed and ready to go. The only thing he regrets is not waiting around long enough to receive the name of the medication he would've been prescribed soon enough.

He'll just have to ask the doctor at the club for an alternative to see if he can fix the problem with his right arm.

His fingers shake, struggling to hold the heavy bag in his left hand. His important stuff is back at the apartment, so he'll plan a quick trip there to see if he can take back anything without getting caught. Gran Torino's place is his next stop after recuperating though, as his old

journal is there. He doesn't think Gran will have a reason to take it or look through it, so he's not worried. He will just have to be quick in getting there. Izuku can sneak onto a train eventually and make it back to Gran's agency simply enough. It shouldn't be an issue.

"Well, my boy, I'm not seeing any open windows or ropes made out of sheets, so that's an improvement!"

Or maybe it will be an issue.

Yagi Toshinori sounds cheery, though the emotions he's exuding right now is the exact opposite.

Izuku blinks, pausing in his work while he processes the words and who exactly they're from. He's still facing the window and hasn't made a move to turn around yet. *All Might?*

He almost doesn't believe it's him at first, because he didn't *feel* him. His quirk. One for All didn't ping him. Extract didn't move or buzz or anything. It was just radio silence.

If he were paying attention, though, he might've realized he was feeling everything that All Might was the moment he stepped inside the hospital and thus could've actually escaped before his mentor could arrive, but there's nothing he can do about it now. He's fucked.

Again.

Why didn't I feel him? He asks silently. *Extract was working, but not for All Might. What did you do?*

One for All ripples inside him but doesn't say a word. Izuku blames it anyway.

The boy swallows, focusing on the dark world outside. "There weren't enough sheets in the closet for that. We're pretty high up. I wouldn't have made it."

Yagi laughs, but it's a small thing. It's more polite than anything. "I see." The door shuts with a click. There are soft footsteps as Yagi moves closer to him. "Where were you planning on going?" Is the next thing he says, but it's not demanding. Izuku thinks it should be, though.

Izuku still doesn't look back at him even though his skin is burning from the attention now. Shame hits him in the gut at the fact that All

Might *caught him.* Caught him like a parent catching their kid with a hand in the cookie jar.

Izuku loosens his grip on his makeshift rucksack and lets it fall on the bed behind him. All he does is shrug with his good arm, his shoulder jerky.

All Might just studies him, watching him struggle with something he's not privy to. Izuku feels his energy wreath around him, enveloping him whole, just like First. Now that he's thinking of it, the two of them feel similar to each other in a lot of ways. Eerily so. He must've just been blind to it all before.

That's when he realizes it.

You bitch, he thinks, though there's no heat behind the words. *Were you distracting me, First?*

As expected, there's no reply. The voices are cowards.

Yagi moves around the bed into Izuku's field of vision, and the boy finally turns to look at him, hoping he doesn't look as pathetic as he feels. All Might already surely regrets choosing him as a successor, but that doesn't mean Izuku has to embarrass him even further by *looking* despicable. That would just be shameful.

A large, bony hand lands gently on Izuku's forearm—his good one. "Young Midoriya?"

Oh, that's right! He asked him a question.

Izuku looks him in the eye but glances away just as quickly. Yagi's eyes are blue. Really blue. The kind of blue that has Izuku second guessing if he had truly seen them and appreciated them before now. Just like Yamada's, All Might's eyes are genuine and open and always kind.

He wonders briefly if his own are seen that way too.

"I don't know," he says truthfully, the weight of Yagi's palm keeping his mind from floating into the air ducts above them. "Away." Anywhere but here, he means. *As far away from my friends and you as possible.*

"You're injured badly. You need to get back up on that bed and rest, my boy. Going anywhere in this state is a death sentence!" Yagi very

carefully puts his other hand on Izuku's right shoulder, wary of his bandages. Izuku barely feels it.

"I've done it before and lived," Izuku says with a frown. He's not joking. He's genuinely surprised that All Might truly thinks he would keel over and *die* out there if he left the hospital right now.

He may be stupid, but Izuku is not that incapable. He's great at improvising. And besides, with this new healing quirk, he'll be in top shape in no time!

"I'm aware of that," Yagi says, sounding slightly exasperated. "Believe me, we'll be having a lengthy discussion soon on your reckless tendencies as of late, but right now we should focus on getting you better."

Izuku shakes his head. He can't rest right now. He doesn't have the time for it, nor does he have that kind of patience. If Father is willing to let six of his Nomu out before they're even ready, who's to say he won't do it again but with more of them? He could be planning strikes in different cities around Japan! Izuku has to be ready. He… he has to direct his attention and focus on stopping All for One's attacks.

Previously he'd been playing the long game, hoping that his days at UA and nights as Rabbit—all that time spent building up his quirks' strength and widening his control over One for All—would give him something to work with. He hoped that biding his time like that would at least let him stand a better chance when it finally came down to—to *fighting* him.

If Izuku even makes it that long, really. He has to! It's not a choice for him. That's his responsibility.

He won't ever be able to rest, and that's okay. Native can't rest anymore, so why should he?

"You promised them, didn't you?"

Izuku flinches. "What?"

"Yamada and Aizawa," All Might elaborates, tone even. "You promised you wouldn't run like how you did before, yes?"

He's about to say he never actually *promised* them when suddenly his memories kick back in. He… did. He did do that.

“Fuck,” Izuku says, eyes wide.

Yagi laughs heartily, having to put a hand over his mouth to contain himself. “I take it you regret that now?”

A scowl tugs at Izuku’s features. He curses his past self for being so damn honest. It felt good at the time, making the promise, but now it’s… now he… actually, no, it *still* feels good. Having that kind of boundary, that is. That line inside his mind that he won’t cross.

Having promises forces himself to do better, to be better.

It’s not as bad as he thought.

Even still, Izuku moves away from Yagi, out of his reach, and finds himself looking back at his runaway bag. Again, he doesn’t have much, but it’s something. It’s a start. He can take *some* time to build up his arsenal of weapons and supplies again. He did it before and can do it again.

He can steal from the overly rich people in those subway stations, which he hasn’t done in a while, or he can pick up more jobs since he wouldn’t be going to UA while on the run! He can start his savings from scratch, but this time he’d have to be a little quicker.

It’ll be hard, but he could do it.

It’s just staying out of trouble that’s the issue. Izuku is certain that if he does leave now (ignoring the problem that is the immovable All Might, the number one hero, who stands between him and freedom), he’ll be hunted for the rest of his life. Aizawa will be forced to treat him like any other criminal. Tsukauchi won’t have his back anymore, not as Midoriya Izuku or as Rabbit. *All Might* would probably want his quirk back too. There are so many factors here that Izuku has to consider.

This really could be a chance for a do-over. A complete restart. He would have zero standing connections with heroes, he’d have more freedom, and he’d have more power.

In theory. He’s not so conceited to think everything would go great for him.

All Might sighs and eventually sits on the edge of Izuku’s hospital bed. He honestly doesn’t look out of place here—he looks pale and sickly, and if you count the fact that he’s currently dabbing at some blood

coming from his mouth then yeah, any normal person would assume the bed is actually for him instead of Izuku.

His blond hair is messy, and he has on clothes that are way too big for him. Comfort clothes, Izuku guesses. The boy knows that Yagi prefers baggy clothes due to the fact he doesn't like certain fabrics being around his skin so tightly. His hero costumes are an exception, as they're made from a fabric that he himself picked out. Yagi has said before that he can barely feel them.

"If you leave now, you won't make it far," All Might says, voice grim.

"Why? You'll stop me?" Izuku doesn't know why he says it. It's not angry or suspicious or anything like that; it's just a question. He wants to know how Yagi stands in all of this. He needs to know his point of view.

"If I'm honest, that wouldn't be an ideal situation. I wouldn't want to have to do that to you, young man." All Might holds his gaze, his next words sounding a little more cheerful. "Ah, tell you what! I'll let you go if you take only a few minutes to tell me why you're feeling this way. How does that sound? It sounds like a fair trade-off to me!"

"You want me to… explain why I want to leave?"

"Precisely!"

Izuku wrinkles his nose and glances away, sniffing. "That's not going to work."

I don't like when people try to stall me, he means.

"Well, then I guess you're just going to have to wait here until you're finished healing, because I'm not letting you go if you don't give me a reason to."

He doesn't sound angry, or annoyed, or anything like that. He says it like a fact, as if he doesn't doubt he'd be able to prevent Izuku from leaving if the boy tries to without explaining himself. Which also implies he'll fight him without hesitation if need be.

For a very small, miniscule moment, Izuku considers the bad option. *What are the chances that I'll win against him?* He asks.

The voices all chime in then, being the drama-hungry and nosy bastards they are.

Truthfully? Slim to none.

Zero.

I'd say a solid two percent chance, depending on if he's had breakfast today.

Don't be stingy now, it's more like five percent, Fifth says.

There's a beat of silence, and then everyone speaks at once.

Oh, so you're lying to him now?

That's generous.

Are you trying to kill him faster?

There's only one way to test this out, guys—

No!

Izuku shuts them out and sighs. "You know, I don't like how willing you are to fight me."

Yagi laughs. "It wouldn't be much of a fight, my boy."

"Wow."

Izuku figures he shouldn't be surprised. All Might has probably been talking with Yamada and Aizawa, which is the only reason he's not acting like his normal self. All Might hasn't said much to him about what happened, so he's more than likely containing himself.

He can see All Might flexing his fingers and fidgeting just a tad where he's sitting. He's nervous yet determined, and Izuku doesn't need the empathy quirk to be able to tell that.

But he does know from experience that a stubborn All Might will always win.

Izuku doesn't want to explain why he was about to leave. He doesn't feel the need to. Maybe, if he extends his reasoning to the—the *heroes'* side of things, maybe he does have to. But for Izuku? He doesn't understand why things can't just go back to the way they were. With Izuku fighting crime, eating sandwiches, living alone, working alone, and *being* alone.

He knows that somewhere, deep inside All Might and Aizawa and Tsukauchi and everyone else, they would benefit from just… leaving Izuku behind. If they forgot about him, if they let him go and never interacted with him again, they'd probably have a much healthier life.

Would they feel guilty? Probably. But Izuku knows that those feelings don't always last forever. They can get over it for their own well-being.

Yagi, however, doesn't seem to be thinking this way. He won't be letting Izuku go anytime soon, so the boy has to think of something.

He doesn't really have time for this. He feels too vulnerable, too emotional, to be speaking about his deepest thoughts like that. The argument he had with Aizawa has left him open and raw, and this is just adding salt to the wounds he already has.

Izuku needs time alone, but he also doesn't. It's a weird thing to navigate. He isn't sure *what* he needs anymore.

Carefully, he leans back against the window, listening to the storm as he tries to come up with a response. He's not ready to concede yet, so he won't sit down.

(He's grateful that the contact on his back is reassuring of the fact he doesn't have wings.)

"It's not safe," he says eventually, when the silence between them gets a little too awkward. "Me being here with everyone."

"You don't feel safe?" Yagi edges closer, bony knees knocking together as he tries to still stay on the bed. "We're all here to protect you, Young Midoriya. You realize that, yes? We will do everything we can to—"

"I'm not talking about me." The interruption causes Yagi to trail off, mouth still open, and Izuku winces. "Sorry. I meant… I mean it's not safe for *you.* For everyone."

Yagi's expression pinches, his gaze imploring. "Why is that?"

That's a loaded question, one that not even Izuku can fully answer right now. There are so many reasons that he doesn't think he'd be able to get through them all before night falls. Yagi won't settle for anything less than the truth, though, so Izuku can't get out of this one

if he wants to go off by himself.

And so Izuku takes a deep breath, preparing himself, and settles on the major reason: “My dad wants me back.”

Silence. Izuku can hear the clock ticking. Can hear the roaring of the wind and the steady thrum of rain outside.

He’s starting a conversation he probably shouldn’t be having, but what choice does he have here? Besides, his filters seem to have just come off in light of everything that’s happened. His mouth just won’t stop moving and digging himself more graves.

There’s a spike of panic in the air, then fear, but worry overtakes them. Yagi searches his face hard, asking the next words slowly, controlled. “Have you been in contact with him?”

“No.”

“Okay.” His relief is palpable. Izuku commends him for his control here. He doesn’t often get to see how great Yagi is at acting, or at least hiding his true emotions, so he usually cherishes these kinds of moments. He wonders if this is a time he’ll cherish too, just like the others. “So, how do you know for certain?”

Izuku gives a dry snort. “He’s the one who blew up my building.”

His mentor’s brows fly to his hairline. “And you’re sure of this?”

“I know for a fact.”

Yagi fists his pants. “Can you… tell me why you think he would… do that sort of thing? You almost died, Young Midoriya. That’s a rather serious deal.”

He’s treading carefully. Izuku is too.

“He doesn’t like me.”

“Well, I figured that much, but, my boy…” Yagi makes a small, frustrated noise. It’s not directed at Izuku. It’s probably more because he doesn’t know how to word what he says next. “Has he ever… done this before? Er, tried to harm you to that extent, I mean? Has he ever… *hurt* you?”

Hurt. He's asking if his father has ever purposefully hurt Izuku before, which would give Yagi better background. Something to go off of.

Has All for One ever hurt Izuku?

No. Not *hurt*.

Hurt is a four-letter word. It's short, almost cute sounding. Like what someone says to their friend after jokingly pinching them. Or what a mother says softly to their child when they get a paper cut.

'Aw, did that hurt?'

No. Father didn't hurt Izuku.

Destroyed, obliterated, desecrated, shattered, and maybe even *demoralized* , but no, he never hurt him.

The man was rarely soft in his methods. He never did half-assed things, so no, he didn't *hurt* Izuku at all. That was far too childish in his book.

"Midoriya?"

Izuku doesn't even realize he's spacing out until Yagi reels him back in with his presence. The man's face is shadowed, and his eyes are dark. He pats the space before him on the bed, inviting Izuku to sit, but the boy pretends not to notice.

"Like I said, All Might," Izuku whispers, "he just didn't like me."

"He planted bombs in your home. I think that's a level above simply not liking."

"He didn't actually place them there. He had other people do that for him, I think. Bombing isn't exactly his… style." Izuku can't help it—amidst the cloying panic welling up inside him comes pride. "Besides, he could never find where I lived. I learned how to cover my tracks from him. Learned from the best, ya know?"

All Might is silent, telling Izuku that maybe that isn't the best thing to say right now.

When Izuku is about to continue on, preparing to ask if that was sufficient enough explanation for him (since he won't be getting anything else from him due to this being danger territory), someone else's thoughts and emotions flit inside Izuku's mind, catching him off guard.

Oh. *Oh.* This is—this is Yamada! He can sense his quirk, that bubbly

and warm power that Izuku seeks out during cold nights, and he can feel his emotions, too. They stand out easily among all of the others Izuku can feel in the hospital.

Right now, Yamada is apparently *extremely* anxious.

Oh, God. Why is he walking so fast? Why is he here? Izuku thought he'd still be busy! He calculated that he wouldn't be back until later! He thought he had *time*.

Izuku already had a slim chance of escaping once Yagi showed up, but now that Yamada is here? He may as well forget about it altogether.

With this thought in mind, Izuku makes a very wise decision.

He turns around, ignoring whatever it is that All Might is saying to him, fumbles with the latch on the window with his good hand, activates One for All almost subconsciously to help break it, and hikes a leg up on the sill in preparation.

Maybe he'll have a better chance by jumping out of the window!

Before he can actually move the window up, though, as his fingers aren't cooperating and have now chosen to be even more difficult than before, there's a plume of smoke, a choking noise, and then strong arms wrapping around his chest.

"Woah, woah, there! Are you *crazy?"* All Might plucks Izuku easily off the ground, muscles bunching and steam rolling off his form in waves. He restrains him, not at all bothered by the way Izuku is kicking his feet. "Why the sudden rush to become a pancake!"

"I wouldn't die, All Might! Let me go!"

"Not—not until you give me a reason first!" Yagi says, struggling slightly when Izuku calls upon more of One for All to aid him.

"Oh my God, *that again?"*

"Stop squirming! I already used up my time limit for the day, please be considerate—"

"No!" Izuku shouts petulantly, getting his good hand free and grabbing onto the window latch. All Might jerks forward and snatches his wrist, accidentally crushing Izuku's other arm in the process. Izuku only feels the pressure, but it still tingles badly enough to be

uncomfortable.

Yagi carries him away from the wall, holding Izuku higher above the ground so he can't catch any footholds. "My, you really are quite strong even when you're— *hey! Quit that!"*

Izuku shakes his head with his eyes squeezed shut, mouth still enclosed around the fabric of All Might's sleeve. He was trying to bite Yagi, not just the clothing, but the hero's instincts and reaction time were just too good. He makes a negative noise, kicking his feet out even more and trying to get his hand free.

This is funny, someone says.

No, it's sad. Is this really what we've come to?

Shut up, this is entertaining and you know it, another chimes in.

Wow, maybe this is sad, huh? Izuku wonders what the other users of One for All must think, watching the two current successors fight like this. Well, not fight, as Yagi said. It's more of a… really pathetic grappling contest.

Izuku thinks briefly about trying to kick the man's sore spot on his side, but he just as quickly throws that idea away. He's not here to hurt All Might, or even argue with him. He just wants to leave. And if that means he has to—

There's a ping in Izuku's brain, and the door to the hospital room opens.

Oh.

All Might and Izuku freeze immediately, and the boy's eyes snap open to focus on the newcomer.

Yamada is halfway through the doorway, frozen as well, face blank. In his hand are multiple bags from a store, and also a laptop carrier. He's wearing different clothes than when he left, but Izuku figures it's because he had to change out of his hero costume after the meeting.

Izuku watches how his gaze goes first to All Might, taking in the way the number one hero is restraining Izuku with steam still coming off him, and then to Izuku himself, who is angled slightly toward the window and *still* biting down on Yagi's sleeve.

Then, Yamada looks toward the broken lock that now sits on the windowsill incriminatingly.

Slowly, his eyes slide back to the pair before him. “So… what’s happenin’ here?”

Izuku lets go of the fabric. “Yama! It’s not what you—”

“He was trying to jump out the window!”

Izuku’s mouth falls open, and he snaps his head around to stare at his mentor, aghast. “What the fuck? All—All Might, you *snitch!”*

“What!” Yagi looks affronted. “It’s the truth, my boy! I won’t lie to him! And watch the language!” He casts a not-so-subtle glance at Yamada. *“He’ll kill me if he thinks I allow you to—”*

“It wouldn’t be lying if you just didn’t say anything at all about it!” He whines, starting to kick again with even more vigor and ignoring the language comment.

Yamada closes the door behind him with a foot and sets his things down on the table, gaze shifting over to the runaway bag on Izuku’s bed. “Yeah, well, that wouldn’t do any of us any good, would it, little listener?”

Izuku shivers at the even tone, and he immediately shrinks in on himself, trying to disappear. Great. Not only have his plans been ruined, but he also looks like a stupid child now, which is exactly what he was trying to prove to Aizawa he wasn’t.

“I—I just wanted some fresh air!” He tries, but even he knows it’s a weak excuse. Yamada already no doubt knew he was trying to leave for good.

“Uh-huh,” Yamada says, entertaining him. “For how long?”

Yep. Maybe Izuku really is just a stupid kid and is in denial. The boy stops struggling, looking suddenly like a deflated balloon in All Might’s hold, and has to stop the sour look from coming onto his face and putting him in an even more humiliating situation. “I was, er, thinking… a few months? Maybe? An extended fresh air break? Think of it like a vacation! I’m kind of tired, and this hospital stinks, so I think if I—”

“Were you thinking like this when I was here, too?” The voice hero

asks, straight to the point.

Izuku falters, his last bit of confidence waning. “No,” he admits quietly.

Yamada’s expression doesn’t change. “Can I ask what happened then?”

When Izuku doesn’t answer, Yagi loosens his grip and sets him back down, stepping away so he can deflate. Izuku instantly feels exposed.

What happened? How is Izuku supposed to answer that? He can’t talk about his conversation with Tsukauchi without putting himself on the chopping block, and he also doesn’t want to even *mention* the shitshow that happened afterwards with Aizawa. And he can’t even entertain the idea of talking about—about the quirks he’s trying to come to terms with, as that would just raise so many more questions.

Damn. And to think Izuku was trying to be more open with the adults around him.

“If I may,” Yagi says, coughing pointedly, “I think Young Midoriya was just feeling a little overwhelmed for a moment there. I was asking him some personal questions, after all. I admit I might’ve… escalated things.” The man flashes Izuku what’s probably meant to be a comforting look. “He wasn’t thinking. You needn’t worry more, Yamada.”

Izuku sways, worrying his bottom lip. He never likes being talked about as if he’s not there, but in this case he appreciates it. The last thing he wants is for Yamada to have to be on edge around him. He shouldn’t have to worry about Izuku running. That’s not his job.

It shouldn’t be.

“You said personal questions?” Yamada looks at All Might next, and the light in the room reflects off his glasses. It’s a prompt if Izuku’s ever heard one.

Izuku wonders how he can be so calm about this, so accepting.

Yagi jumps at the opportunity, probably trying to steer the previous subject away. “Yes! Young Midoriya and I were just having a discussion. It was very pleasant!” He pauses suddenly. “Well, mostly, I think.”

Someone needs to give All Might the *Excellent Liar* award, and stat.

His skills are unmatched.

Yamada has a look on his face that clearly says *yeah, I don't believe any of that bullshit, dude,* but is too polite to say the words aloud. Yagi must sense he's not doing a very good job of calming things down, though, as he drums his fingers on his skin and tries for another sheepish smile. "So, perhaps it was not very pleasant."

Izuku wishes he could pinch him.

The voice hero lets out a considerable hum. "Oh, yeah?"

"We were on the topic of, ah…" All Might trails off, his eyes shifting over to Izuku. He doesn't seem to want to share what Izuku entrusted him with. He's clearly conflicted, and Izuku can feel the guilt tearing at him from the inside out.

He has an obligation to report things like… like *that.* He can't exactly keep what Izuku revealed to just himself. The conflict is there, and Izuku wishes yet again that he could just *stop* putting the people in his life in these kinds of impossible situations.

Izuku clears his throat, fiddling with his bandages on his right arm. He should finish the sentence first so Yagi won't have to. "I was talking about Dad."

Dad. *Dad.* Why is he calling him that? Like it's some kind of name he ever called All for One? He is— *was* 'Father.' He was never *Dad.* He was Master and Sensei and Sir and *Father.* He may be Izuku's dad, but he is not 'Dad.'

Izuku's teeth clenches. He forces his breathing to slow, feeling another headache coming on. "My father, I mean."

Both heroes are looking at him. The air in the room cackles, resembling the lightning outside, and tension forms. Izuku gathers up his courage and stares back, hoping they can't see the way he shakes.

"I was… telling Yagi why I, uh, feel it's not—not safe for everyone. With me here." He talks slowly at the beginning and rushes near the end, his words choppy. "Because of my father. And what he's like."

Yamada pulls the chair from the table and sits closer to the bed, listening intently. Though his face is carefully blank, Izuku knows his brain is working fast. He waits for Izuku to continue, but Izuku really doesn't want to say anything more. It was one thing to admit to Yagi

that his own blood was pretty much responsible for blowing up his goddamn building, but it would be another to tell Yamada that.

One, because that would mean Izuku *lied* to them, as he told them previously that he didn't know much about the people behind the attack, and two, because it's embarrassing.

He's not exactly going to brag about having a father who is trying to capture him in a trap like some kind of pest.

Izuku likes to think he's evaded his father's grasp multiple times, pretty easily in fact, but it's altogether too clear now that things are about to get a lot harder. It's rabbit hunting season, and that's never good for runaway sons like Izuku.

"Midoriya. Why didn't you ever tell us about it?" Yamada asks, and Izuku blanches, seeing how Yagi is now on the other side of the room and beside the voice hero, looking grim. Huh. He must have quickly filled Yamada in on the details Izuku was leaving out.

Why do I keep spacing out like this? How long did that happen for?

And why does Yamada have that look on his face? The one that isn't quite disappointed but getting there? The one that makes him look sad? The one he only ever uses on students like Kaminari and Ashido whenever they interrupt class by gossiping in Japanese?

It's like he's searching for something. No—he's already found it, but he just can't get to it.

Izuku decides he doesn't like being on the receiving end of that look. He'd rather have a billion fights with Aizawa than have to face that every day.

With both men's attention on him, watching his every move, his every nervous tic, Izuku can't think of anything to save himself with this time. (Is that it, or does he just not want to lie anymore? Maybe there's some distant part of him that just wants everything to be over. He doesn't know yet.)

"I can't tell you anymore than that," Izuku says apologetically, "so what would have been the point in even mentioning it? It's not like you could've done anything. You—you don't know my father or where he's at or what he's like, so just being told that he's the one who… who or— *orchestrated* all that wouldn't have done shit." Izuku jolts, voice cracking when he corrects himself nervously. "Anything! It

wouldn't have done anything."

Izuku doesn't miss Yagi's small, amused smile.

Yamada's response is blunt, though not unkind. "We don't know anything about Midoriya Hisashi because you refuse to share with us what you know. You won't tell us your experiences, which, for now at least, is alright. That's okay, kiddo. But this?" He shakes his head and scoots forward a little more with his chair. "If we know your father is capable of doing something like that and is willing to risk killing you to get whatever he wants… we'll be able to prepare a little more. We'll be able to better protect you, even. Knowing who we're up against as heroes is our biggest possible advantage, listener. Without that knowledge, we're going into things blind. And when we have a kid at stake, we can't accept that. That's not enough. *We* are not willing to risk you. That's why we're trying to find answers."

"I'm not a kid, though," Izuku mumbles. "And I don't… I don't want you guys to get hurt trying to protect me."

"However much you think you know," All Might starts suddenly, reminding Izuku that he's present, "you're still learning, young man. The fact remains that you *are* a child—don't even try to deny it—and while you may not want help, or even think you need it, you will still be receiving it." His head cocks to the side. "My boy, do you really think we'd kick you to the curb like that? Let you fend for yourself in a time of need?"

No, but it'd be easier if you did.

Izuku huffs, turning away again. He doesn't know how to tell them that that's exactly the issue. They're going to get hurt if they keep trying to help Izuku. They don't know what they're getting into. They need to be away from him, they need to steer clear from all this.

"We're pro heroes," Yamada reminds him softly then. "This is quite literally in our job description, yeah? You shouldn't have to keep these things to yourself. Sometimes relying on someone else is a good thing. That's why communication is very important. For all of us. There's a reason we made it a rule."

Shame pools in Izuku's gut at the reminder. "I know I should've told you about it, but I thought Aizawa and Tsukauchi already suspected it, so I didn't think it'd matter that much."

"Suspecting and knowing are two different things." The voice hero

pauses for a moment. “I want to make it clear that I’m not blaming you for anything. What’s happened has happened, and it’s in the past. I’m just glad we know some things for certain now. Besides, there’s been enough doom and gloom recently to last us all a lifetime, don’t ya think? We can set this on the back burner and talk about it more later. Is that cool?”

“I think that’s a fine idea,” All Might says eagerly.

Izuku, though grateful, wrinkles his nose at the idea. Great, that’s another *discussion* he’ll have to dread. He has like, what, four impending now? He hates talks. Especially with adults. He never knows what they’re going to do to him.

Only guilty kids fear talks, one of the voices says to him.

Izuku stops himself from snorting aloud. *Yeah, I know. I’m fucking guilty.*

“You know what? You both must be hungry!” Yagi claps his hands together and heads for the door. “I’ll be back with some food. I’ll just have to sneak it in, but I’ll be quick!”

He makes his departure after saying goodbye and leaves Izuku and Yamada alone. The blond chuckles and looks back at Izuku, who’s still standing. “Why don’t you sit down, kiddo? You’ve been standing for a while.”

“I like standing.”

“I get that, but your body needs some time to—”

“I’m not ungrateful,” Izuku blurts out suddenly.

Yamada’s smile quickly vanishes. “What?”

“I just…” Izuku’s right arm gives a little jolt, as if a shot of electricity has just run through it. The boy pushes aside his hope and ignores it for now. “I realized how I was sounding before, that’s all. And I’m… sorry. I appreciate all of what you guys have done for me. Really, I do! I appreciate it a lot.” Izuku looks back and forth between the ceiling and Yamada’s forehead. “I don’t want to make it seem like I’m ungrateful or something. I just really don’t want you guys to get hurt.”

“It’s alright, kiddo.” Yamada leans back in his chair. “I know how you think, and I know it can be difficult to get used to certain things. I’ve

mentioned that to you before, haven't I?" His green eyes are clouded with red. Izuku feels an intense kind of sincerity start to roll off him in waves. "Trust is hard, but it can be worth it in the end. I'm happy you're starting to confide in us now, Midoriya. That's a big leap."

Coming from anyone else, the words might have sounded sarcastic, or mocking, but from Yamada they sound nothing but kind and almost *proud.* Izuku doesn't know how to deal with the way his heart starts to beat a little faster in his chest at the idea.

"And there's also no reason for you to feel as guilty as you are." Yamada continues on without stopping, ignoring the wide-eyed look Izuku gives him. "Is this about Native? What did I tell you before about him, kiddo?"

Izuku listens to the rain again. It's quieting down. "I know you said it's not my fault, but I can't help but—"

"Nope! There is no *but."*

"But I was—!"

"Absolutely not!" Yamada wags a finger at him. "I said this earlier and I will say it again, however many times I need to: there is *nothing* you could have done in that circumstance that would have saved Native from his end *and* kept you, Tenya, and Todoroki alive. Native made a choice, and it was to protect you three. *That* is how he chose to go out. You cannot blame yourself for a hero doing his duty. Doing so disrespects his sacrifice."

There's another jolt through his right arm. The tingling has turned into something sharper. More painful.

In this case, pain is a good sign.

"Maybe," Izuku says eventually, a step above a whisper *,* too tired to argue with the one man he knows he'd never win against, "but he shouldn't have had to die so soon."

"'Course not. That's just the way things swing sometimes, ya know?"

"Yama, I…" The boy closes his mouth then reopens it, debating on if he should continue with this train of thought. After a second's debate, he decides *to hell with it.* "I see him everywhere now."

"Native?"

“Yeah.” Among others.

Izuku expects confusion, he expects shock, hell, he even expects disgust—but what he doesn’t expect is the sudden sadness he feels coming from Yamada. The hero isn’t even surprised.

It’s like he was expecting something like this.

Yamada’s gaze softens, and his voice grows gentle. “After going through an event like that, that sort of thing is normal. Seeing or even hearing things… it’s not an unheard of reaction to trauma.”

Trauma? Izuku has never liked that word. Yamada doesn’t seem to be a fan of it either.

“It’s hard at first, but you’ll get used to it. And eventually you’ll start seeing him less and less. Do you understand?”

Izuku doesn’t think he does. He doesn’t think the voices or the visions will ever go away, but maybe that’s how it always is. Maybe that’s denial. Or fear.

Yamada obviously knows what he’s talking about (and doesn’t that make Izuku’s heart hurt for a different reason), however, so Izuku should listen.

“Yes, sir,” he says, and Yamada looks past him, out of the window and to the dark clouds.

“I’ll always be here to lend an ear, Midoriya. Don’t ever hesitate to ask me something.” Thunder makes his eyes spark. “Though I’ll probably make you say it in English.”

Izuku would probably laugh any other time. Instead, he just nods his head and comments about how he’d actually enjoy that.

“Once you’re able to return to UA,” Yamada continues carefully, “I want to propose to you the idea of seeing Hound Dog so you can talk to him about it. You don’t have to say anything or make a decision right now. I’m just putting it out there.”

Hell no, he thinks, but he nods anyway.

The silence that follows isn’t uncomfortable. Izuku’s eyes are drooping now, and he thinks it must be because of the medicine again, but he tries to fight it off.

He still has some things he needs to get out. He needs to tell Yamada that Iida and Todoroki know his identity, if he doesn't already know. He also needs to give him a true apology for being such a damn *idiot*. There's also a ton of information that Izuku has yet to share with him.

"You look dead on your feet, Midoriya. Please just lie down." Despite the way he frames it like a suggestion, it comes out more like a command. "You try to rest before Yagi comes back. He's probably going to bring you a full course meal."

Izuku, with his survival instincts finally kicking in, obeys. He pushes off the wall and awkwardly sits on the edge of the hospital bed before twisting his body and pulling his legs up. It's difficult to do without full use of his arms, especially since his balance is all out of order, but he gets it done. Yamada doesn't offer help, though he watches Izuku like a hawk.

The boy is grateful he didn't intervene.

Yamada makes a small noise of approval and gets out his laptop, pushing his glasses up and typing in the password. "I'm free for the next couple of days since the internships are still going for the other students. I won't have to be back at UA for the third years' advanced training until four days from now, and by then you'll probably be let go, so fortunately I'll be able to stay with you here until you're released."

Izuku hides a wince when he leans back and turns onto his side, back facing Yamada and eyes on the window. It's becoming a safe haven for him. "Okay." He's glad he doesn't have to make eye contact in this position when he continues. "You really don't have to stay, Yama. But… thank you."

The typing doesn't stop. "I don't do things halfway, listener. I made an obligation to you, and I'm not going to leave you hanging. Of course I'll be here. I *want* to be here." A pause. "'Sides, who else am I gonna watch the new Kardashians episode with?"

This pulls something like a laugh from Izuku. The storm takes over their conversation for a few minutes, and Izuku doesn't mind. He has his own thunderstorm brewing in his brain. There's something else taking up his attention.

And he doesn't think he can keep it to himself for long.

When he has figured out the typing pattern Yamada is unknowingly

making, Izuku speaks.

“Aizawa said he’s taking away Rabbit.”

“Not forever,” Yamada says easily.

“He said forever.”

“Well, Shouta’s a dick. But he’s also right.” His gaze burns Izuku’s back. “It should be forever. You know that, right? The only reason we allow you to go out and be a vigilante is because we know you’re capable. We know you… *need* it, for lack of a better way to say it. But, just like with all things, there is a balance we have to find, listener. We can't let Rabbit turn into some kind of addiction.”

Izuku frowns, and his neck cranes so he can look at him. “It’s not! I know how to—”

Yamada lifts a hand, and Izuku falls silent immediately. “I’m not saying you don’t know how to regulate yourself. But I am saying we could all use a little help sometimes. And right now you really, desperately need to rest. I mean, look at yourself! Let someone else take care of that kind of stuff for a while, yeah? Japan isn’t going to crumble because you’re gone for a little while. We’ll have people pick up your routes.”

Despite how good the offer is, Izuku just can’t let it go. He forces himself up on his elbows, teeth gritted at how uncomfortable it is. “Sir, I can’t give up Rabbit. I just got this new job! And the—the girl I’m researching! She needs me. I need to keep watching over the situation or she’s gonna get hurt. The mission is a time-based one, Yama. This is like the worst time for Rabbit to be away!”

“Midoriya, even if *we* weren’t putting your nightly activities on hold, you’d still have to go on at *least* a two or three week break in order to get back to peak performance. I’d say even a month's break. Even with your quirk, the nerves you damaged in your arms aren’t going to just magically be healed. We still don’t know exactly what’s wrong yet.”

“I won’t do anything strenuous, then. I can—I can *find* that balance quickly.”

“I understand how you feel, but we can talk about this and your mission later, when you’re feeling better and in a good state of mind.”

This makes Izuku’s brain swim. “My mind is fine!”

“You’re slurring your words,” Yamada says in amusement. “Go to sleep, Midoriya.”

Izuku’s eyes narrow, but he dutifully goes back to his previous position and keeps his mouth shut. He saw how it turned out with Aizawa when he kept arguing about his vigilantism, and while he knows Yamada probably won’t react the same way, he still doesn’t want to go too far.

“Don’t worry about Rabbit. It’s not forever. Just… indefinite. As I said, we’ll figure it out when we’re all back together.”

Indefinite. Huh. Okay. He can work with that. He can make that work for him.

By the time Izuku is successfully forced into sleep, exhaustion taking over, he’s forgotten all about his need to escape.

The price of carrots has gone up.

She sighs and places the bag in her basket, shaking her head ruefully. With everything going on nowadays, the people are in panic-mode and buying everything they deem essentials—which is basically everything they set their eyes on first in the store.

It’s great for the economy, she guesses, but not for people like her who are just trying to live simply and peacefully. She has the money, so she’s not too worried, but it’s still a little bothersome.

The direction of her life can be altered so quickly that she’s always on edge. It’s happened before, multiple times, so she has to be ready.

Eggs are getting expensive too, and so is her tea. She decides to skip out on the tea this time and heads for the register. She likes to drink the tea because it helps her sleep, so really it is kind of a need, but she has some left at home. She can wait until next time to get them.

Hopefully somewhere less expensive, too.

It's raining when she gets outside, so she ties up her long hair and takes out her green and black umbrella before starting the walk back to her little apartment.

She's on the fifteenth floor, and it looks like the elevator is actually working today, so she takes that all the way up. Sometimes she's not so lucky. Sometimes she has to take those dreadful stairs all the way to the tenth floor before taking the second elevator (the one that only starts from the tenth, which should frankly be illegal for short people like her) the rest of the way. She unlocks the door after checking her surroundings a few times and listening for potential intruders on the other side.

Taking off her shoes and stepping into her slippers, she basks in the quiet stillness of her place. It's not too small but not too big. Modern enough to not give her a headache but also casual enough to not make her feel too out of place.

It's familiar, she thinks. That's what the feeling is. That's what her therapist told her, at least.

She moves around often, paranoia making her flighty. This time, though, she thinks she's found the perfect apartment. She won't have to move for a while yet.

Why this place is familiar to her, she doesn't know. Maybe because it's like Back Then. Maybe it's the layout. Or maybe she just really doesn't know what she's talking about. This feeling could be nothing at all. Could just be her mind jumping through hoops again.

Usually, it takes her a while to decipher between the fake and the real. It all blurs together sometimes, just like how it started in the beginning, but her therapist has been helping with that. With the derealization. She's been… trying. A new friend of hers at work has been pushing her to better herself.

And now she is trying to learn how to love living again.

It's a slow process. Almost uncomfortable. But she likes to think she's getting there.

She's on the couch now, having put all her groceries away. She was going to make something nice for dinner, but she forgot. She'll settle for something quick later on, probably. That's how it goes for her on these kinds of nights.

The television is on and is set to the news. That's one of the only two channels she watches. She likes to be aware of things, as it's a need of hers now, so she only watches this and that hero documentary program. That channel is for when things get bad again.

She watches the reporters talk about the same stories they've been broadcasting for days now. It's never ending, though she can't say she doesn't understand why. The attack on Hosu city, which is just an hour away from her, was devastating to many. She can barely watch the scenes they keep replaying from it.

But then the story shifts, and it goes back to her interest. Clips of the vigilante known as *Rabbit* have been compiled together, and when it plays, it captures her attention easily. It's the same thing, over and over, but it's not boring.

A small, hesitant smile tugs at her lips despite the context of the news story and what they're trying to pin on the boy.

It's him, she knows. She has a bad memory, but she's been remembering him more and more as of late. She's been… *feeling* him. Sensing him, almost.

He has always been there alongside her, a ghost-like presence that makes a home in her misgivings and visits her in dreams, but it's never been like this before.

Something's changed. He's all around her, he's in her mind, and she's in his. It's as if they were born from the same constellation of stars, the same stars that currently reside in their veins, and really that's not so far fetched given their relationship.

It's just been so long that she had almost forgotten.

She has a cupcake in her hand now. It's carrot-flavored, and she made the cream cheese icing herself, just like how she used to make it. She used up all the carrots she just bought to make it, but maybe it's worth it. Carrot cake is a favorite of his, isn't it? She wonders briefly if he ever actually liked her homemade cakes or if that was something fake too, but she shakes herself from those thoughts.

Real or not real? She asks herself, remembering the advice her therapist told her. She closes her eyes and thinks, trying to remember, and eventually settles on real.

She wants it to be real. She doesn't want that to be fake. And that

scares her—the wanting. She hasn't wanted something so strongly in such a long time.

When she opens her eyes, the singular candle on the cupcake is still lit. She listens to the reporters talk about the vigilante's past accomplishments and rise in popularity, and then about his latest crime, and she takes a small, calming breath in.

More footage of his past fights replays, and she sees how the boy strikes a very familiar, dorky pose right after saving a bunch of people, and her smile grows.

She doesn't think it's his birthday. In fact, she doubts it's even close to it, but she can't be sure after all this time. She's missed so many that she may as well try to catch up.

Birthday or not, Midoriya Inko looks down and blows out the candle for her son.

Chapter End Notes

> yoichi is trying to bond with his nephew but is stupid so he doesn't know how
>
> also! first look at midoriya inko :') we'll be seeing more of her soon
>
> I associate this song on yt with inko and all for one
>
> inko: my son?? commit murder??? i pretend I do not see
>
> r

cantaloupes and wings

Chapter Notes

> im genuinely surprised that a lot of you thought inko was dead dead. I thought I had made it a little more obvious than that haha. well, im editing my earlier chaps to fit the plot better so I'll make sure to add more background on inko to save future confusion!! i hope it didn't come too out of left field
>
> (warning: references to child abuse)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aizawa left his book in Izuku's hospital room.

It taunts him just by existing. Just by sitting there at the edge of the table. Izuku hates looking at it, so for the first few minutes after remembering it's there, he doesn't.

He looks out the window, which he's done for pretty much the entire time he's been here in this room, and closes his eyes.

The wings on his back are heavy again. He's supposed to ask the nurses for the numbing cream whenever he starts to feel in pain, but Izuku hasn't done it yet. He won't be allowed to put it on himself due to the state his arms are in (which is complete bullshit, in his opinion), and Izuku is not going to let some random nurse rub it on him again, so for now he'll deal.

Maybe if he can get Yamada to ask them for the whole tub, Izuku can just sneakily put it on by himself when no one is paying attention.

Either way, the wings make swishing noises whenever his muscles twitch—a side effect of the other medications they're pumping through his veins. He sits on the edge of his bed and imagines, for just one moment, that they're actually there. That the red, leathery wings are real and physical and not just a phantom pain he ripped from someone else.

Something else, One for All corrects. He can't pick out who the voice belongs to right now.

Izuku opens his eyes. "If you call Tsubasa a thing, I've gotta be one too."

Would that be so bad?

Traitorously, Izuku's gaze moves to Aizawa's book again. His head is full, stuffed with stained cotton of all colors, and he wants it to be empty. Just for a second.

That's all he needs.

He wonders what was so important in that damn book for Aizawa to have been furiously scribbling in the margins of it while he was here. It's pretty large, and it looks well worn. Aizawa either got it previously owned or has had it for a while now. Izuku bets that it's the second.

Which also pisses him off for some reason.

Without really thinking of any consequences, Izuku shifts from where he's sitting on the bed and reaches for the book. It's heavy; it takes two hands to carry and a little bit of Boost.

He sets it on his lap and glares at it.

Aizawa leaving his book behind is probably the biggest mistake he'll ever make in his life, because now Izuku has decided to snoop. To be fair, he has been stuck in this dreary hospital for almost two days now with nothing to do, so can you blame him? He's bored.

And a bored Izuku isn't a fun one.

The boy runs his fingers over the cover, a small frown forming on his face. Some of the leather is flaking off, and there are a few brown stains on the corners of it. Coffee, he thinks. That's what it must be. Izuku would know, as he's had his fair share of coffee spills while note-taking in the early hours of morning.

When he flips to the first page, he sees that it's not really a book so much as it is a journal. Aizawa has cut out snippets of articles and textbooks and taped the papers onto the lined pages, leaving space around them for him to write and take notes. He even has photos and diagrams glued and drawn in.

It's a messy kind of neat. It resembles Izuku's own journals.

Izuku hates it even more.

Very quickly on into reading through the book, Izuku decides that his

stupid teacher's handwriting is absolutely atrocious.

He's seen the man's writing before, of course, since he's his teacher, but the connection goes back even farther than that.

Sometimes, on rare occasions, Aizawa would have a busy patrol night, and he would ask Izuku to run an errand for him—usually something small and *not* dangerous like dropping off a handwritten message to one of his coworkers at his agency. Anonymously, of course.

Izuku would read all of those messages back then, he can't lie. He's pretty nosy. He'd study Aizawa's handwriting, his language, his speech patterns, the way he abbreviated certain words—he'd analyze it all. And he would tuck it all away into a neat little folder at the back of his mind for later.

Just in case.

He does it to most of the people he comes into contact with. It's a safety net for him to fall back on in case he ever needs to know an individual's handwriting for some reason.

It came in handy when it came to his mother. He can't count how many times he's had to forge documents using her signature.

Anyway, he can safely say that *back then* —the term he has started using to refer to when they still only knew each other as Rabbit and Eraserhead—Aizawa actually had pretty decent handwriting. It was rough, a little scribbly, but still readable. It was far better than the average person's, too. Aizawa's writing was never slanted then. It was always straight but just a little jagged near the ends of where the various lines ended.

Now, however, that's changed.

Izuku is looking at the annotations Aizawa left in this book. He remembers the man reading and taking notes in it when he woke up after the surgery, but he didn't know exactly what he was working on.

That doesn't matter now, though. What matters is that Aizawa's handwriting has changed, and not in a good way.

It's sloppy. The characters are uneven. They're all different sizes and are slanted pretty badly, with most of them being crooked entirely. Izuku himself can barely make out the words, which is how he *knows*

it's bad.

Why did this happen? Why did Aizawa's handwriting change so drastically in the span of just a few months or so? Izuku isn't sure, but it's scaring him. It makes his stomach feel as though it's been filled with lead.

And *that* is why he's now calling it atrocious. It truly is unsettling to look at.

He must have been writing quickly, Number Four speaks.

Izuku shakes out his hand to get rid of the tingling sensation before turning to the next page. "Or he was frustrated. I've never seen him write like this before. Maybe on mission debriefing papers, but…"

Six pipes up. *Ask him about it the next time you see him.*

At this, Izuku scoffs. "You're funny."

I'm glad you think so.

Izuku shuts them out, scanning over the pages thoughtfully now. Some of it is general stuff about villains Aizawa has fought with before, and also ones that *Izuku* has fought. The boy smiles when he sees that one of his criminal *regulars* has been caught by Aizawa about as many times as he's been caught and jailed by Izuku himself. It seems they share a lot of the same track records.

Details of some of Aizawa's latest missions are also laid out here. Izuku skims over it, wondering how Aizawa can be so negligent to leave something this important just sitting out. Did he forget it or did he intentionally leave it behind? Either way, Izuku is going to rub this in his face the next time he has some courage.

"And he says *I'm* reckless," Izuku mumbles sullenly. "I'm not the one leaving detrimental shit out for just anyone to take."

Rip everything out to teach him a lesson then, Number Five offers, making Izuku huff out a laugh.

Maybe we shouldn't do that, Seven cuts in quickly.

Let's vote!

Izuku can't even get angry at them for still speaking despite his best attempts to shut them out, because now he's near the middle of the

journal, and he doesn't like what he sees.

The red tab on the side has his last name on it. Shortened, only spelling out the first couple of characters: **MIDO.**

It's not a coincidence, he figures out. There are more notes in this section and less of those articles and diagrams. Each entry has dates on them, and Aizawa appears to not have skipped even a day since he first started this section a couple months ago.

Aizawa has random thoughts and incomplete sentences written down, some in bullet format, some in little tables. His handwriting here is even worse, Izuku notices.

Near the beginning, a lot of the entries are almost incomprehensible, as Izuku can barely make out what they're supposed to say. His name pops up a few times in it, and so does Yamada's, but Izuku doesn't exactly think anything of it until he reads one of the pages in the middle of the section. This one has a small snippet of an article taped in. The headline reads: *Neglect, and When to Step In.*

Izuku blinks. He rereads it, his brows drawing together. Huh. That's… an interesting title.

Definitely not something he would've expected when opening this book.

Mouth going dry, Izuku steadies himself and reads part of it: *What is Neglect? Neglect is the ongoing failure to meet a child's basic needs, and it is the most common form of child abuse. A child might be left* ***hungry or dirty,*** *or without* ***proper clothing, shelter, supervision or health care.*** *This can put children and young people in danger. It can also have long term effects on their physical and mental wellbeing.*

Some of the words are highlighted in yellow, others in green. There's no key, so he has no clue if it's intentionally color coded or not, but it's intriguing all the same. As a hero, Aizawa should already know this information, right? He should've taken courses catered to this kind of stuff.

Why is he retouching on all of this now?

Izuku's eyes fall back to the tab, to his last name, and he lets out a long, slow breath before flipping the page.

Signs of Neglect. Neglect can be really difficult to spot. Having one of the

signs doesn't necessarily mean a child is being neglected, but if you notice multiple signs that last for a while, they might show there's a serious problem. Children and young people who are neglected might have:

- *Poor hygiene and **appearance***
- **Health and development** problems
- **Housing** and family issues
- Change in behavior

Next to the highlights this time are the words *presented* or *shown.* It doesn't take a genius to figure out what this is; it's a case study. On… Izuku?

Honestly, what else could this be?

In a way, Izuku isn't surprised, as he knew Aizawa must have been keeping tabs on him (quite literally) ever since they started talking with each other, but it still feels like a punch to the gut. Because these notes aren't on Rabbit specifically—they're on Izuku.

Izuku the homeless kid. The student at UA who broke the long-standing record of points scored in the entrance exam. The kid who's been spending more time than he would prefer in a white hospital room.

For a second, Izuku tries to imagine being Aizawa and having to write these things down, being the observer, the one kept forcefully out of the loop. He feels bad, but not for long.

*A child might not understand they're being neglected. If you're worried about a child and want to talk to them, we have advice on **having difficult conversations.***

The last part has a sticky note next to it that reads *ask Hound Dog.*

Izuku thinks of the very large, furry hero, and nearly laughs out loud trying to imagine Aizawa asking the counselor for advice. The next paragraph makes Izuku sober up, though.

If a Child Reveals Abuse. A child who is being neglected might not realize

what's happening is wrong. And they might even blame themselves. If a child talks to you about neglect it's important to—

Izuku's arm twitches. He skips this part and moves on, his eyes narrowing. He doesn't want to read any of this, but he'll be lying if he says Aizawa's notes aren't interesting. This is about him, anyway, right? Seeing as this section so far has been mostly about Izuku and his interactions with Aizawa, it would make the most sense.

Children who've been neglected might experience short-term and long-term effects. These can include:

- *problems with* ***brain development***

Beside these words, Aizawa has written: *trauma on growth plates, sensory disorders(?), reference Chiyo.*

Izuku reads on.

- *taking risks, like* ***running away*** *from home, using drugs and* ***alcohol or breaking the law***
- getting into dangerous relationships
- difficulty with relationships later in life, including with their own children
- a higher chance of having **mental health problems, including depression** and—

The next few pages are skipped by Izuku too. He doesn't enjoy having to see all of this being laid out so plainly. It grinds on his nerves. It makes him jittery.

He was not neglected. Izuku was never *neglected.* He left by his own choice. While his father was of course not the greatest figure for him, he still had Kurogiri. He can't claim to have been neglected back then. Doing so would disrespect all of what Kuro was. And plus, Izuku *chose* to live alone. He chose not to tell Auntie or the police about his

homelessness.

Izuku wanted it to be like that, so no, he wasn't neglected.

And reading these notes about how he apparently shows or *did* show the signs of being abused that way makes him maybe a little more upset than he should be.

Kuro didn't get in trouble with All for One all the time for lying for Izuku just to be called neglectful.

It's insulting.

The next few entries are more lighthearted, and Izuku finds himself clinging onto the words, trying to calm his anger.

These meds are making him much more emotional than he usually is. Well, he likes to think so, anyway.

He's fine. His heart rate has slowed down, his thoughts aren't jumbling together anymore, and things are okay.

Some of Aizawa's entries are funny, surprisingly. His humor is dry as always, and it matches with Izuku's own. Aizawa is so effortlessly funny that it's almost infuriating. He mentions Vlad King and his interactions with Izuku a few times in his writing, and Izuku is pleased to see that Aizawa doesn't like Kan's views any more than he does.

All Might has his own section in the book. Aizawa has written information down that he's apparently received from Yagi himself, which isn't a lot.

Izuku preens at the fact. *That's right. All Might isn't gonna be your snitch, Aizawa.*

Like a healed bird getting eaten by a much bigger hawk moments after being released back into the wild, Izuku's returning happiness is crushed by the next few entries he decides to read.

He doesn't even have to read the headline this time. He'd know Midoriya Inko's face anywhere.

Mother Leaves Six-Year-Old for Dead!

She's young in the photo the newspaper used. Her eyes are bright but uncertain, and there's a light blush on her face that speaks on her uncomfortableness.

Her hair is pulled back, and she has her nurse attire on. This photo must've been taken on her first day of work. Before she had Izuku, most likely.

Izuku wonders why they chose such an old photo of her back then. Maybe that's all they had of her, or *maybe,* he thinks, a stone dropping in his stomach, they chose the one where she looked the most naive in order to paint her in an even worse light. It's not impossible.

Either way, the world goes quiet when he stares at her. She's facing the camera, so it's almost like she's staring right at Izuku. If he extends his imagination, it could almost be real.

He swipes his bandaged thumb gently over her black and white cheek, his mind fuzzy again.

It's been so long since he's last seen her physically that it feels almost traitorous to be looking at this photo of her. She doesn't look like this now, he's sure. Whenever he thinks of her, he pictures an older version of her. He thinks of his mother from *before.*

Before Izuku hurt her. Before those bright eyes became clouded with grief and some other emotion Izuku could never understand.

He doesn't like to remember her from *after.*

Either way, he's unsure who she is now. Is she the Inko from before? Or the Inko after?

Maybe she's something in between.

It's not his business, though. He swore to himself he'd never talk or interact with her again until he's figured everything out and made this world safer for her, and he's going to keep that promise.

She has her hands on her hips, Izuku sees. Though he'd really rather he didn't, as that's when he notices the small red ring on her left hand: her promise ring. The one Midoriya Hisashi gave her.

Izuku's face darkens.

With his hands shaking and fingers twitching, Izuku grabs a hold of the page and tears it out.

He crumples it into a ball and throws it with One for All somewhere across the room.

Aizawa's journal follows quickly after.

Todoroki and Iida are at the door the day Izuku is released.

Yamada had to take a phone call, so he's somewhere down the hall when they arrive, not within earshot.

Izuku doesn't know what to say when he sees them. What is there to say? After everything they've been through and everything they've seen, words just can't seem to measure up to anything worthwhile yet.

So Izuku is quiet.

Iida walks in first, and Izuku immediately notices how one of his arms is bandaged and in a sling on his chest. That last hit Stain managed to get in must've really hurt him.

Otherwise, Iida looks relatively uninjured. There are scrapes and a few burns on the skin not covered by his clothes, but Izuku has no doubt they extend to underneath. They're healing fast, though.

Todoroki looks the same, except both of his arms are bandaged a little. On his left hand, little calluses shine beneath the fluorescent lights.

Frostbite and heat burns , Izuku's brain supplies. *He went overboard.*

The nerves on his skin are probably damaged, same as Iida. Hopefully not too bad—Izuku hopes they're able to heal.

"Midoriya," Iida and Todoroki say at the same time, breaking the silence, and Izuku drags his gaze up to look at their faces.

Their eyes look like Izuku's, and it feels wrong. He misses Iida's sharp eyes and Todoroki's chilly ones—it suited their features perfectly. They're both still so beautiful, though.

Izuku, for one moment, is struck by the fact that both of his friends can still look so dashing even during what must be a rough healing

process.

“We would’ve seen you sooner,” Todoroki begins roughly, cutting off whatever it was that Iida was about to say, “but those bastards wouldn’t let us visit until you were released too.”

“Todoroki,” Iida admonishes, though he doesn’t say anything further on the *bastard* comment. Instead, he walks closer until he’s right in front of Izuku, who has his legs hanging off the side of the bed. “I’m glad to see you awake and well, Midoriya. We were told by All Might-sensei that you had to have surgery, but we didn’t know the full extent of it all, but…”

He trails off with a pained expression, but Todoroki quickly fills in the gaps. “It wasn’t hard to guess you had some serious problems. When my father was carrying you, none of us could tell if you were breathing. You looked dead.”

The thought of his friends anxiously watching him and coming to the conclusion he was killed because he was passed out doesn’t sit right with Izuku. It makes his eyebrows draw together.

He never meant for them to witness something like that.

Iida sends yet another cutting glance over to Todoroki, who’s standing by the foot of the bed. “You could try to be more tactful, you know!” His arm tries to move, as if attempting to gesticulate as usual, but since it’s in a cast it can’t go far. The blue-haired teen winces, then sighs, and Izuku’s stomach clenches. “I apologize, Midoriya. For… for all of this. None of this would have occurred if I had—”

“This again?” Todoroki asks, obviously annoyed. Why he’s being so aggressively talkative, Izuku doesn’t know. He enjoys it all the same. “I told you it’s stupid to give unneeded apologies.”

“Just because *you* think it’s not needed doesn’t mean that it isn’t! Besides, Midoriya extended his hand to me the day we left for our internships, and I didn’t take it.” Iida swallows, turning his gaze to the floor. “He offered me a way out, even if he didn’t realize it then, and I turned him and Uraraka down. If I weren’t so blinded with rage then, you both wouldn’t be injured. And—and Native—”

Izuku’s hands clench around the sheets. “Don’t.”

Iida and Todoroki go quiet immediately, eyes a little wider, as if realizing that this is indeed the first time Izuku has spoken since they

arrived.

Todoroki reaches for him. “Midoriya—”

“It’s not your fault, Iida. It never was.” His voice shakes when he continues. “Even if you sought Stain out for bad reasons, you still ended up distracting him from Native long enough for others to arrive and help finish him off. If it weren’t for you and—and you, Todoroki… Stain would’ve killed Native himself. And he wouldn’t have gotten the… the proper hero’s death he did.”

Izuku doesn’t agree with that last part so much, but he’s just repeating what Yamada told him. If *he* said it, then it has to be true, right?

Of course, Native’s death should never have had to happen, but in terms of heroics, it wasn’t the *worst* way to go out, really. It was better than a lot of deaths, actually. At least, that’s what Yamada reassured Izuku of the other day.

“If he could do it all over again, I don’t think he’d regret stepping in front of you, Midoriya, even if you told him what would happen,” Yamada says, and he’s looking somewhere far away. “Surely it wasn’t such a bad way to die. In the place of someone else. Someone he might’ve believed in, ya know?“

Todoroki and Iida are still quiet, watching him with differing expressions, and Izuku continues before he loses his nerve entirely.

“And about… Rabbit,” he starts, his voice cracking painfully on the name. “I’m sorry for—for keeping that from you. That’s not how I wanted you two to find out. I swear I would’ve told you eventually. I don’t know when, exactly, but I would’ve.”

I trust you, goes unsaid but not unheard. *It shouldn’t have taken me so long to realize it.*

Todoroki cuts in. “You weren’t obligated to tell us anything. Rabbit is a criminal, so I wouldn’t have told anyone about it either.” He pauses suddenly, head tilting. “But it’s weird I was talking to you about him without knowing.”

I guess it’s even more awkward than me having to listen to everyone talk about Rabbit.

Izuku lifts up a hand to rub at the nape of his neck. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. But, uh, if it helps any, it—it was really kind of flattering,

and I—y'know, I really appreciated—"

He doesn't have a chance to finish his confession, as suddenly his mouth is full of fabric. Izuku chokes, his eyes going wide as he registers what just happened.

Iida is bending down to be on Izuku's level, and he has his large, muscular arm wrapped around him tightly. He's pressing Izuku up against him, and it takes a second for Izuku to remember what this is.

A *hug*.

Izuku can barely breathe, and not just because of the grip Iida has on him. He's so shocked that he honestly can't even believe it's happening. When was the last time Iida was this close to him—outside of training, of course? He's never been a touchy-feely kind of person, and, really, Izuku's never been either. Not anymore, at least.

In fact, Izuku can only count two other times that Iida has physically contacted someone in this way: Uraraka was crying one day at lunch and Izuku was severely lacking in the comforting department, so Iida had to step up and let her cry on his shoulder; and then there's that time Izuku was about to eat shit on the pavement after training for hours on end that previous night and Iida caught him with ease.

That's it.

So *this* is concerning. Is Izuku about to get raptured? He feels like he is. Why is Iida doing this? Is it an actual hug like Izuku thinks it is, or is he misinterpreting? Maybe Iida is about to pass out. Maybe he just tripped for an extended period of time. It was so out of the blue, so sudden, that it *has* to have been a mistake!

But just when Izuku is about to ask if Iida is alright, he's suddenly hit with a wave of emotions nearly strong enough to make him buckle. Amidst the usual grief and sorrow and guilt, Izuku feels… *loneliness*.

Iida is alone. He feels too small for his body, Izuku assumes. That's what that other unidentified emotion in there is.

Izuku moves his face so he can look at Todoroki over Iida's broad shoulder. He extends his senses, eyebrows furrowing as curiosity overtakes him, and he lets Todoroki's own thoughts wash over him.

While there's sadness inside him, too, Izuku feels more self-loathing and anger than anything.

This realization has Izuku's soul aching for him.

After a moment's hesitation, Izuku lifts up his hand and extends it to Todoroki, not breaking his gaze. The boy blinks, surprised, and starts to move forward immediately after realizing what the gesture means. He pauses soon after, as if unsure, but Izuku doesn't give him any time to rethink his actions before his arm is shooting forward to grab at him.

A little white cloud escapes Todoroki when his lips part, no doubt the doing of his right side, but he doesn't object to the manhandling. Izuku tugs him in close, and it's awkward at first, he'll admit.

Iida is still holding him, but he shifts a little so Todoroki can move in beside him. Todoroki *oh* so carefully rests one arm first around the blue-haired boy and then another on Izuku's back. His touch is feather-light, his insecurities shining through even with the smallest of actions, and Izuku hugs him back with all the desperation of a dying man.

No words are spoken, but it's better that way.

Here, Izuku doesn't have to think. He just has to *be.* He's sure it's the same for his friends.

Iida's arm is stiff, and he's resting a bit of his weight on Izuku—but not too much. It's obvious he's being careful not to hurt him. Todoroki, on the other hand, is uncharacteristically… soft. As if he's melted into it all.

It's definitely not something Izuku would have expected out of him. He seemed even more non-hug friendly than Iida before this.

Though, really, what room does Izuku have to judge?

With the three of them huddled up like this, awkwardly holding each other, it's like a little prayer circle. Except there's no praying going on here; they're way past that.

Izuku is hyper aware of them pressing on his skin, and he sags in relief when he realizes he can feel the pressure a little better than before on that one arm of his. Maybe it's not a lost cause after all.

When another five seconds of this intimate moment has passed, the door to the hospital room is pushed open, but Izuku feels it before he actually sees him.

“Hey, kiddo, are you about ready to—oh!” Yamada breaks off and immediately turns around, stuffing his phone in his back pocket. The damage is already done, though, as Todoroki is the first to break apart from the hug with Iida following. “Sorry! Didn’t see you two sneak in.” He holds up his car keys before going back out the door. “I’ll be in the hallway whenever you’re ready to go, Midoriya! No rush.”

Izuku musters out a weak acknowledgement, coughing to clear his throat and embarrassment at the same time.

The door shuts, and the air becomes heavy. Iida presses the palm of his hand into his red-rimmed eyes, as if drying whatever moisture is there. When Izuku’s gaze drifts over to Todoroki next, he sees that his eyes are red too.

I wish I could do more, he thinks suddenly, surprising even himself.

Izuku doesn’t say a word aloud, though, not knowing if either of them even want to acknowledge what just happened.

Iida pushes his glasses up closer to his nose after wiping them with his shirt, seemingly a little more put together. He apologizes about his outburst, but Todoroki is quick to tell him he doesn’t need to.

And then it’s quiet again, and Izuku’s brain is being emptied of the cotton. He’s hyper aware of the clock on the wall (it’s slightly off-center, and it’s tilted a little, meaning that his perception of the seconds-hand is off by a fraction due to the depth of the clock itself); each tick makes his skin itch.

Todoroki speaks again not too long after, seemingly unable to sit in silence now despite previously wanting nothing but that back when he first started the school year.

“So,” he begins, staring straight at Izuku. “All Might and Mic-sensei. Do they have shared custody?”

His voice is unsure, but there’s a slight uptilt at the end that makes it seem like more than just a question. Like he’s venturing more than he ever has.

Iida frowns at the question and opens his mouth, as if about to object or reprimand for venturing into their teachers’ personal lives, but he refrains at the last moment. Because then—

Then it *makes sense.*

Todoroki is joking this time, isn't he? He's… actually teasing Izuku? He's not being serious about the whole 'secret love child' thing right now?

Another tired breath escapes Izuku at this notion, at this realization that maybe things haven't been fucked up, at least not completely, and for a second, (just a fraction of one) he feels… okay.

Izuku turns away and can only smile.

Yamada is whistling for a majority of the time during the long drive back to the apartment.

How he has that much energy, Izuku will never know. He's had his suspicions about drug use for a while, but now this basically confirms it.

His voice hasn't cracked once, either, though that's probably a perk of his quirk.

Izuku is sitting in the back seat, longing to be back with Missy. He's been texting back and forth with Kacchan, giving him reassurances that, despite what he saw on the news, Izuku is not actually a murderer and will not be getting put in prison due to Yamada or someone turning him in and snitching.

He obviously knew Izuku didn't actually kill Native, of course, but the point still stands.

Kacchan's internship is apparently annoying yet informative now, in the blond's own words, so Izuku is happy for him. Best Jeanist is certainly a good choice for him.

Izuku's glad his friend is getting the insight he needs.

"You can always sit up here, y'know," Yamada says, meeting his eyes through the rearview mirror. "Looks kinda lonely back there."

“I’m okay,” Izuku whispers. He’s holding onto his travel bag—the same one that now contains Aizawa’s journal. Guilty, Izuku had taped the page back in and kept the whole thing for himself, hoping he’d one day have the nerve to give it back. “This seat is comfier.”

Yamada laughs a little. “I think so, too. Shouta calls me crazy for it, but I swear everything feels different when I’m in the backseat. It’s just so much better.”

It’s quieter, Izuku thinks, but doesn’t say. Somehow it has a different atmosphere than being up in the passenger seat.

“Say, do you know how to drive, listener? I know you’re not old enough to have a license, but I’m curious.”

Izuku blinks, thinking back to the multiple occasions where he’d stolen police cars to join in on some high speed chases. His face burns, and he stares hard at the floor. “Er, sorta. I was never taught but I, uh, eventually got the hang of it with… experience.”

“Experience of the illegal variety?”

“Something like that.”

Yamada’s amusement leaks through his next reply. “I gotcha. Well, maybe soon I can take ya to get your permit. How does that sound?”

Izuku blanches. “You’ll take me?”

“Why not? It’s a useful thing, being able to drive. Especially when emergencies like this happen. You can’t always rely on trains or rooftop hopping to get around.”

I was planning to do just that, actually.

“Even All Might knows how to drive,” Yamada continues. He flicks his blinker on and turns left. “Trust me, it’s good to get it while you’re young.”

Huh. Maybe Izuku will do that. He was never going to get his driver’s license, mostly because he’d need an actual parent to go with him. Plus, he’d also have to provide legal, *non-fabricated* documentation. Which he didn’t have back then.

It’s still weird for him to think that he’s actually *real* now. Well, he was *always* real, but he means in court terms. A month ago, he always

had that looming fear at the back of his mind that he'd one day get caught, that his interference and illegal document-changes would eventually be noticed and bite him right in the ass.

Now, he can let those worries go. It's weird. It's like he's traded one bad thing for the next.

"It was really nice for Iida and Todoroki to stay behind and see you," Yamada starts again, pulling Izuku free from his reminiscing. "They were released way before you, so I was surprised to see them."

"Yeah." Izuku shifts a little in his seat. "I—I honestly didn't think they'd want to see me after everything."

Yamada gives a considerable hum. "You said they learned about Rabbit during the fight, so I can understand your fears, listener. But I'm glad they stayed by your side. Those are good friends."

They are. Izuku won't be forgetting that anymore.

Before they left, Yamada offered to take Iida and Todoroki with them, as it's a long drive back to Musutafu, but they each declined and said they had someone coming to pick them up.

Izuku wouldn't admit it to just anybody, but he can't wait to be back in his bed. He can't wait to take a real shower. He feels *disgusting* after the few towel baths he was allowed.

On the bright side, he does have a tub of that back cream stuff that the doctors gave to him, so he's happy about that. Yamada has Izuku's four other new medications up front with him, and Izuku will never forget the look on his face when the nurse handed him the packet of instructions on how to administer each of them to him.

Two of them are pills, which is easy enough (Izuku has experience in popping medications like that), and another is a seltzer tablet. While Izuku isn't thrilled about that, as he never likes to put fizzy things in his water, he can deal.

But the fourth? It's a syrup meant to be taken orally every other night.

Syrup.

It's bitter, disgusting, vomit-worthy, and has a strong aftertaste that has Izuku's appetite leaving for hours afterwards. He would know, as he was forced to take his first dose this morning. He was close to

kicking that one nurse when she held out the spoon for him to take—and he really *did* kick one of those damn doctors when he was denied water to wash away the taste.

"He can't drink water for thirty minutes after he takes this," the mutant man told Yamada, who was busy giving Izuku a dangerous look for kicking the doctor. "There's a possibility it'll make him drowsy. He will drop like a fly out of nowhere, and I'm not exaggerating this, Mr. Yamada. Please make sure to monitor him."

Izuku called bullshit on all of that. He still thinks he should've been allowed water, or at least something else to get rid of that nasty taste. He swears he can still taste it in his throat right now; that's how bad it is.

When the doctors and nurses left, Izuku was left to stare into Yamada's eyes challengingly, a sour look on his face. Yamada was holding the bottle of bitter syrup, looking like he had just been dropped off in the middle of a war zone.

Even he knew that he wouldn't be getting Izuku to take any more of that.

Izuku *will* be fighting tooth and nail, mark his words.

When they have only another hour left of driving, they stop for lunch and then continue on their way. This is when Izuku notices something, though.

"It smells like cantaloupes in here."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I liked the cherry smell better."

Yamada nods. "That's what Nemuri said. Guess I'll have to buy more of those car fresheners. They've got some of those cherry ones at the mall." He brightens up considerably. "Speaking of! We really need to go shopping for some new stuff for ya! How about we go to the mall next weekend? They've got tons of sales going on then."

"Shopping? But I think I have everything I need."

"It's not about needs, kiddo. But even still, you do definitely need some new clothes and furniture. I told you that you can decorate your room however you like, so don't be shy. We can get ya some posters

or shelves for whatever you want!"

Izuku's nose wrinkles. He's not fond of Yamada spending money on him, but he knows by now that it's not a good idea to say that. So instead of arguing, he just nods, biting his inner cheek.

Maybe it's not all bad. They might have some All Might figurines.

Since his limited edition ones burnt up, he needs to make up for it. It's bad luck if he doesn't have at least five figurines of All Might near him at every start to the morning.

He's tested it.

When they arrive at the apartment, it's evening time. Yamada suggested that Izuku get some rest since he must still be tired, but he denied it.

He's exhausted, sure, but it doesn't feel right. Being able to sleep, that is. Not after everything.

He feels like there's something missing still.

Izuku is lying on the loveseat, his legs hanging over one of the armchairs. Missy is sprawled out on his chest, her fur keeping him warm despite him not having a blanket. She must've missed him too.

"Where's Aizawa?" He asks, not looking up from where he's staring at the television.

Yamada folds the last piece of his laundry and gathers it all up in his arms before standing up. "He's got a lot of work to do, so he's staying at the station for tonight."

"Oh."

Yamada's words were clipped. *Short.* He didn't sound angry, exactly, but he did sound a little terse.

Izuku wonders what happened between the two of them for Yamada to be acting so upset at having to even mention Aizawa.

Yamada puts away his clothes in the bedroom and eventually comes back out, looking much brighter. The apartment is dim (it always is when it's just him and Izuku, as neither of them appreciate bright lights—it's not good for headaches or heavy-thinkers), as the only lights on right now are in the kitchen. Pots and pans clang around, and hands rummage through the fridge.

"Did you have anything in mind for dinner, Midoriya?" he calls.

Izuku stands and makes his way to the kitchen, clutching Missy in his arms. "No, sir. But can I help?"

Yamada gives him an indecipherable look before shrugging. "'Course! How does *takikomi gohan* sound, then?"

To Izuku, who's only been allowed to eat disgusting hospital food for the past few days, that sounds delicious. He can truly think of no other food that could beat takikomi gohan right now—except katsudon, obviously.

And so for the next spanse of time, Izuku watches Yamada work and copies him at his own station at the far end of the counter. The blond asks him to cut things for him, and Izuku does. He's instructed to put things in the pot, and he does.

He likes to be helpful, and Yamada must sense it, because he continues giving him things to do.

When dinner is finished, it's pitch black outside, but Izuku still doesn't feel like sleeping.

He cleaned the kitchen and dining table already— *and* the cats' food and water bowls. What should he do now? What else is there to do?

Izuku grinds his teeth. He itches at his jaw. His eyes dart back and forth at seemingly random places in the room.

Nothing has changed since he left to go to the internships, and yet it feels like everything has. It's been, what? Five days? Give or take? The walls feel tighter. The living room is not as big as he used to think.

His heart is palpitating. He hears it pumping his own blood, and he finds it equally as disturbing as it interesting. He brings his knees to his chest, glaring at the fuzzy carpet down below. His socks are mismatched. How did he just now notice that?

You shouldn't mix your socks on accident. It's different if it's on purpose, but by *accident?* No. That's not acceptable. He should fix that next time.

He blinks and sees a little girl's face. Red, watery eyes stare back at him with stark white strands of hair framing them.

That's right. I almost forgot about you.

He still has a mission, and—although everything that's been going on recently has made him start thinking about other aspects of his life—he can't neglect that.

But since he's injured now and Aizawa is being a complete *ass*… how is he supposed to do any real work?

Izuku scowls to himself.

Of all the times this shitshow could happen.

"I'm going to sneak out," he declares, feeling ballsy.

Yamada stops what he's doing and glances at him, his phone light casting a glare over his glasses. "Y'know, I don't think it's called sneaking out if you tell someone before you do it."

"You don't know when I will, though. It's the surprise factor that makes it sneaky."

The man hums in agreement and goes back to his scrolling. "Well, that's true. I should thank ya for warning me, though, 'cause you know I can't let you do that."

"If I'm fast enough," Izuku says, eyes narrowing, "you just won't catch me."

"Maybe not, but I'll figure out what happened quickly." He wags a finger at him jokingly, one perfectly plucked brow raised. "Sho'll be mad if he has to go retrieve you when he's supposed to be working."

"He's always mad," Izuku dismisses, unfazed. "That won't stop me."

"Okay, what if I said that *I'd* be upset?"

Now, this captures Izuku's attention.

He thinks for a few seconds, that weird feeling settling at the pit of his

stomach again. He stares at Yamada, who isn't looking at him anymore. He's busy typing something quickly on his keyboard. The silence between them is almost like a challenge. Like an opportunity for Izuku to say something back.

But truly it's not even a battle, as Yamada probably already knows he'll win it. He's just waiting for Izuku to realize it, isn't he?

Izuku crosses his arms and leans back a little. He doesn't say a word.

Maybe another time he'll try it, he figures.

When Izuku thinks he's about to burn holes in the carpet with the way he's concentrating, Yamada claps his hands together.

"It feels like a movie kind of night! What do you say we watch something fun?"

"The new All Might documentary," Izuku offers immediately, craving his mentor's presence in any way he can.

Yamada winces. "Y'know, maybe something that's a little more lighthearted?"

Oh, that's right. There are like twenty minutes of raw, unedited footage of All Might's worst fights in that new documentary, isn't there? That's probably not the best thing to watch right now after…

"A Disney movie?" Izuku says quietly, voice getting high towards the end. When is the last time he's watched one?

"Sounds good to me! You haven't watched Tangled yet, have you? It's a *really* old one."

"Is it the one based on the Rapunzel fairytale?"

Yamada snaps his fingers as he gets up to retrieve the remote. "Sure is! I think you'll like it, kiddo. It's Shouta's favorite."

Huh. Izuku thinks he'll hate it now. In fact, he'll make sure he does.

So perhaps Izuku was wrong.

Maybe Izuku is absolutely *enthralled* by this animated movie from centuries ago that Yamada still somehow has the footage of.

It's beautifully crafted and so engaging, and for once even the voices are silent as he watches—hell, they're probably watching it too through his eyes.

When's the last time they watched a movie? Besides the movie of his life, that is, it's probably been a while for them.

While Izuku has never been too interested in musicals, he really enjoys the songs spread out through the storyline. It makes his insides jittery, and he can't seem to sit still on the couch while eating his popcorn.

Yamada is eating kettle corn, which is apparently something he really likes. Izuku hates kettle corn personally, however. He doesn't see what's so nice about it.

"Her hair could be seen as a really powerful quirk nowadays," Izuku mutters. "A lot of people would kill to have it."

"Which is what makes it even more relevant for today's day and age. It's a warning just as much as it is an encouraging movie."

"It's very realistic."

Yamada gives him a teasing smile. "Even the weirdly personified horse and chameleon?"

"Especially. I mean, come on, we've got Nezu, and that's basically the same thing, so…"

Yamada laughs and then immediately pulls out his phone to, no doubt, save Izuku's comment for later. Izuku will pay for it most assuredly, but he doesn't really care.

The action scenes in Tangled are better than decent, and Izuku is quite surprised. Yeah, he is *definitely* going to be trying out the moves Flynn Rider showed. They look fun.

Also, Izuku needs a noble companion like Maximus. Seriously, how awesome would having a badass martial artist of a horse be? Izuku is envious.

As the movie continues, the boy finds himself grinning less and less and frowning more and more. The entire last quarter of the movie is just… dark. Izuku didn't expect it to be this way.

He watches as Mother Gothel frames Flynn Rider—Eugene, now—and manages to put Rapunzel right in the emotional trap she needed her in to get her back under her control. He listens with a sick, *twisted* feeling in his stomach to the things Gothel tells her to 'comfort' her.

God, it's so smart and cunning that Izuku is momentarily taken aback by what he's seeing.

It's all so good and believable that it's no wonder Rapunzel doesn't think anything of the warning signs. Why would she? She doesn't know anything else.

The movie continues, and when it reaches the part where Gothel stabs Eugene, Izuku swears he feels it too.

"Hey," Yamada says suddenly, and in the faint light Izuku can see him reaching towards him. His teacher taps him on the hand, and it's only then that Izuku realizes he's been digging his nails into his arms.

"Oh, sorry! I just—I'm—I just…" He struggles to find the right words, still watching the screen hungrily.

Gothel is dragging Rapunzel back by chains, and the horror Izuku is feeling makes it hard to look away.

The words are spilling out of him before he can think them over. "How could she do that, Yama? How could she do that to her own daughter? I mean, I know she's an evil witch and Rapunzel isn't actually hers, but like… she still raised her for eighteen years. Her entire life!" He shakes his head, setting his popcorn bowl aside. "You'd think she would've grown somewhat attached to her, right? To an extent that she'd treat her at least *semi* -nice? I mean, she's supposed to be her daughter. I don't think I understand, sir."

Yamada's concern is clear as day, along with his trepidation, but Izuku ignores it. God, he hates this empathy quirk more and more every day.

"But she did treat her nicely," Yamada points out gently. "And that's the scary part, isn't it? Mother Gothel gave her gifts, she made her promises, and she did everything under the guise of protecting her so-called daughter. She even gave her a little freedom inside the tower

itself through books and education. To Rapunzel, Gothel was a picture-perfect mother. Maybe a little overprotective, but who's to fault her there, y'know?" He sucks in a breath, his face souring. "She was 'nice.' But, kiddo, power just corrupts. What's that proverb? *Absolute power corrupts absolutely.* She was only nice to Rapunzel for her own benefit. She was always an actor. The only effort she put in was when she was sure it would keep Rapunzel satiated and obedient. That's what it was always about."

Izuku tips his head at these words. "Well, is it bad that I think she *did* love her? Before what happened here in the movie? It was a bad kind of love, but it was love nonetheless. Mother Gothel loved her for what she could give her, sure. She loved her for her naivety. She *didn't* love Rapunzel for who she really was or was supposed to be. And so, when Rapunzel grew up and left her, she… she snapped."

Something like sadness takes over Yamada's next words. "I think even a 'bad kind of love' isn't love at all. It's just manipulation."

But if it's all you had, wouldn't you want it to be love? It was love to me. That attention.

"How could she do that to the girl she called her daughter?" Izuku asks again, watching how Euegene cuts off a huge chunk of Rapunzel's hair.

How could he do that to his own son? Some part of himself asks at the same time.

Yamada must see the look on his face, or at least sense his new mood, as he reaches for the remote again. "Y'know, it's gettin' pretty late. I think we ought to wrap it up for now and—"

"No!" Izuku interjects, much louder than he intended.

The silence that follows rings in his ears, taunting him. Izuku is breathing heavily again. He swallows the new dryness in his throat and looks away, staring at how Pickles is currently having a staring contest with Meatball.

"Sorry," he mutters. "I just, er… I want to see how it ends."

It's quiet for what seems like the longest time. Izuku can feel Yamada's intense gaze on his face, and it makes him feel subconscious. But then Yamada puts his hand back in his lap, gradually. "Okay," he agrees, sounding neutral. Like he's calming down a wounded animal. "There's

not much left to watch anyway. But after this, straight to bed, okay? Your body is exhausted, son."

Izuku nods vigorously in agreement, and the movie starts up again.

He feels bad for shouting like that, but he really does need to watch the end of it tonight.

Because Izuku wants to see what he could've done differently those few years ago.

The wings that stare back at him this time are different from the ones Izuku are used to.

He's not sure he understands it, but in this part of his brain, he's quite positive he's not supposed to. It would be impossible.

Izuku is staring down at the black pool again, having finally gone to sleep after hours of staring at the ceiling and contemplating just knocking himself out. When he awoke, he found himself in this void realm again.

Which isn't surprising. He was trying for the past few days before the internships to get a hang of what this place was.

He was close to the pool right upon spawning in, but he still had to shake off those monsters. They're feeling particularly rowdy this time. Izuku has an inkling he knows why.

It's because of the wings.

While Tsubasa's wings were large, red, and proportional to his body, Izuku's wings are not.

He stares at himself in the oily reflection of the moon pool. His wings are pretty small, being only four or five feet in length on each side, and they're not red. On the posterior side, the wings are pure white. There's not a speck of dust or dirt on them, but they are speckled with tiny black dots and littered with pink scars. On the opposite side,

however, they're pitch black. The kind of black that has you going, *wow, okay, that really is an absence of everything and anything.*

Inside the black interior are star-like structures. They're so small yet so bright that Izuku doesn't know what else to call them. It's like he has his own sky full of stars on one side of his wings.

Which would be perfect for flying at night, wouldn't it?

Despite how exciting the idea of this is, Izuku's guilt and confusion outweighs it all.

The not-stars glitter and twinkle at him, and his brows furrow. He doesn't understand why it's different for him. He can sort of understand why he has wings at all in this realm, as this is so obviously some kind of quirk realm or storage cabinet for him, but he just doesn't know why his are so unlike Tsubasa's.

It's going to tear Izuku apart until he figures it out. For now, though, Izuku is just set on reaching the other side of the moon pool. He knows there's someplace over there, just doesn't know what.

He needs to know. His curiosity is like a drug that's eating him away from the insides. He wants to also get out of whatever hell this is, so there's that. He definitely has some incentive here.

Hopefully it's better on the other side. That's all he can say.

With this thought in mind, Izuku breathes in deeply and steps right into the sludge of stars.

He sinks beneath the waves, and again he drowns with only a bubble to remember him by.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the wait, it's getting to be that time of year again.

things will pick back up soon. im anxious to get the next arc out i listen to this song on youtube and I can only think of Izuku and all the OfA users for some reason :')

o

nursing wounds

Chapter Notes

> i was very lucky to not have been in the danger zones for hurricane ian. hope everyone is ok if y'all were hit badly!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Midoriya never makes messes he doesn't clean up. Hizashi realizes this when he begins to straighten up the living room after the movie is finished. Midoriya has already gone to his room, and just from the tired look Hizashi saw on his face, he reckons he's already asleep by now.

There isn't much for Hizashi to clean, so he takes to folding up the blankets and setting them over the backs of the couches. Missy is still out here, having decided to not follow her kid this time, so Hizashi scratches her head before moving onto the kitchen.

He wipes down the counters and makes to load the dishwasher, only to see that it's already been done and is starting a cycle.

Thoroughly pleased, Hizashi goes into his office to grab his plans for the next week of class and sits at the dining table back in the living space. The lighting in the office sometimes makes his head hurt, so he prefers to be out here most days. He reserves the office for his DJ work and other things, since the room is soundproof.

Which reminds him that he needs to go in early tomorrow night to record an interview with a top twenty pro hero. The whole prefecture has been buzzing with excitement about it, though Hizashi can't say the same. His management team warned him that this new hero is rumored to be kind of a dick, so he'll just have to see how it goes.

That's one of the only downsides to being a radio show host, in his own fine opinion.

Next week they're starting subjunctive clauses paired with *if* statements in English. It's an advanced topic for most of the students, he knows, but he's doing it just to give them some more background information for next year's topics.

Hizashi wants his students to be near fluent before even *starting* their third year. That's why he's so hard on them.

They'll appreciate it later.

(Besides, most of them have been working with English since they first started learning to talk, so things come much quicker to them than to others.)

When the key slides into the locks on the door, opening it, Hizashi makes sure to keep his expression cool, his face blank.

At this time of night, there's only one person this could be.

Shouta walks in with his sleeping bag over his shoulder and a bag full of his supplies in his hand. He has his glasses on, meaning he must've come from another meeting with Tsukauchi, not patrol.

Hizashi marks one of the questions he's reviewing with his red pen, not looking up. "I thought you were staying another night at the station."

"Naomasa kicked me out." Shouta sets his things down and takes his hair out of his bun.

Hizashi doesn't have to see Shouta again to know that he looks disheveled. He can smell the cheap cologne from where he's sitting. His husband probably hasn't showered in a hot minute.

He wrinkles his nose. Another mark is made. "Can't imagine why."

Shouta doesn't reply. He just stares at him for a second before moving past him to enter the kitchen. He's going for his stash of iced coffees, most definitely.

Truthfully, Hizashi hasn't seen or talked to him face to face since they split up at the hospital so Shouta could investigate the area. Meaning that Hizashi hasn't been able to talk to him yet about what happened. Or, more specifically, what Shouta did.

Hizashi prides himself on being someone who can reel in his emotions when the situation calls for it. He's pretty good at keeping his expressions under control so his students won't have to worry about whatever negative emotion he's feeling that day. That's not their job, and he knows his kids are already stressed about their own lives, so he never wants to give them a reason to doubt his ability to teach or keep his composure. He's an adult, and he makes sure that that is known to every single one of his students.

Which is why Hizashi is always known as being upbeat and outgoing. Rarely is he ever visibly upset or angry in front of students or people he isn't familiar with.

In the privacy of his own home, though? When his student is asleep and his husband is finally back, giving them a chance to be *alone* together?

Hizashi can let his emotions slip through. And, God, he's been waiting for quite a while to let some of them out.

This is why, back when he and Shouta went on duo patrol routes as freshly-made pro heroes, *Present Mic* was always known as the scarier one.

The night before they left the hospital, Hizashi managed to get Midoriya to talk a little bit about what Shouta said to him, as he just *knew* that something must have happened between them. He was so certain that Midoriya wasn't going to try and escape that it came as a shock to him when he walked in and saw Yagi restraining him from jumping out the goddamn *window*.

And, really, if it were any other situation and *any* of his other students, Hizashi would have probably forced them to sit their ass down and start a ten page essay right then and there on the dangers of recklessness, rash thinking, and failure to communicate in emergencies, but it wasn't any other situation. It was Midoriya, through and through, so Hizashi had to push away his immediate anger and fear at the idea that the kid was so willing to gamble with his life like that.

He forced himself to focus more on *why* it was happening rather than on what was happening. Which probably made him come off a little colder than intended, but it was necessary.

Just from what he heard, Hizashi isn't happy with what Shouta said. No, he's not pleased at all.

He would never claim to be perfect at those kinds of conversations himself, but *come on.* The things Shouta said were so poorly executed and so immature that Hizashi began to question if it really was him that talked to Midoriya at all.

(Somehow, though, Hizashi could still see it.)

Shouta is talking to Hizashi again, speaking about the stuff he's been

doing for the last day or two, but it doesn't matter. Hizashi doesn't honestly give a rat's ass. If he found anything actually important in his research, he knows Shouta would have already told him by now. Usually right when he found it, too.

And so Hizashi doesn't feel bad at all for his interruption.

"Were you drinking the other day?" He begins, voice clipped.

Shouta pauses, turning to face him with his iced coffee held to his lips. He's still in the kitchen. "What?"

Hizashi's eye twitches. He knows his husband heard him correctly the first time but he repeats himself anyway to make this move faster. "I asked if you had anything to drink the day you visited Midoriya in the hospital."

"No. I was working, 'Zashi."

Hizashi doesn't know if that makes this better or worse. Not the drinking part, as he already knew Shouta would never have alcohol at a time like that, but the working part. His husband called that working. As if going to check on their student—the one they're currently housing and trying to bring up—is just a part of work. Something he had to 'deal' with. Something that came with the job.

That's not how he really feels, right? Is Hizashi looking too much into it? He knows he kind of pressured Shouta into taking Midoriya in, but he still thought he cared for him on a level a little deeper than just *obligation.*

Hizashi's knee starts to bounce. This is just like before.

"Oh," he says, voice low and shaky with how hard he's controlling himself, "so you were sober when you said all that shit to him then. That's good to know."

From the corner of his vision, Hizashi can see Shouta's lips part in surprise, his eyebrows rising up to meet his messed up hairline. He's obviously not used to hearing Hizashi curse at him like this, as he doesn't do it often.

He never wants to or has to.

When Hizashi doesn't say anything else, Shouta sets his coffee down and sighs. "Hizashi, I'm not in the mood for this right now."

“I don’t care what you’re in the mood for. You know, I wasn’t exactly in the mood to have to go do damage control after my partner left our student an emotional wreck, all alone in a foreign hospital and city, but that didn’t exactly work out for me, did it?”

The sharp tone must do it for him, as Shouta immediately deflates. “I’m sorry. I know the conversation shouldn’t have happened, but things just got out of hand. It wasn’t planned.”

At this, Hizashi’s head snaps toward him. “Out of hand? You threatened him, Shouta!”

“It wasn’t threatening. I was just telling him how things were going to be from now on. He needs that kind of bluntness, Hizashi. He wouldn’t have appreciated it if we kept our intentions from him.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like he’s appreciating your bluntness now, either.” Hizashi scoffs, his voice low and dangerous now. He leans back against the chair and crosses his arms. “And even besides that, what were you thinking when you dropped that bomb on him and *left?* You know how much Rabbit means to him. It’s his impulse control for Christ’s sake, Shouta! What did you think would happen if you left him alone after you said all that?”

Shouta shakes his head. “I prepared for this decision a long time ago, you know. This wasn’t some heat of the moment thing.”

“No, you obviously didn’t prepare. If you were *really* prepared you would’ve known how to handle his reaction. And to tell him you’re taking away Rabbit right after he just witnessed everything he did? After what happened to Native? Keep in mind that he had *just* finished fighting the Nomu— *and* Stain. His teacher. Are you *kidding* me?”

Shouta stands at the archway of the kitchen now, matching Hizashi’s pose. “He was pushing for it. He wasn’t giving me much of a choice at the time.”

Seriously? He’s going to play that card? Hizashi can’t believe his ears. He has half a mind to simply take out his hearing aids and ignore the bullshit his husband is spewing now.

“You are a grown ass man,” he hisses. “You know when, where, and how to say certain things, and *then* was not it. I already didn’t like the fact that Tsukauchi had to ask him all those questions right after he woke up, but I knew it was necessary and that we couldn’t do much of anything about that. But here? We had a choice. You should’ve

waited. Or at least have been a *little* more sympathetic. He's fifteen, Shouta! Do you not understand that?"

Shouta rolls his eyes and moves more into the light to see him better. "Of course I understand that, Hizashi. You and I both know his situation." He swipes a hand down his face. "It was going to happen sooner or later. And I for one am not going to wait around for him to hurt himself again. I am not going to wait for a call from Tsukauchi or a headline on the *fucking* news channel telling me that he's been killed."

His words turn watery near the end, and Hizashi watches him, face shadowed.

"You didn't see him." Shouta's hands turn into fists, and they hang by his side. He's not looking at Hizashi, nor at the wall. He's looking somewhere else. "That night when I had to pull him from the rubble. You weren't there, Hizashi. You didn't see it."

I know. I saw the look on your face when I arrived at the hospital. I felt guilty for being relieved that it was you who had to save him and not me.

"He was so… still. His eyes were closed, and it was like he was sleeping. I thought he was already gone." He shakes his head again, his glasses being folded and set on the counter beside his coffee. "I thought it was all for nothing. Everything we'd done."

Despite the vagueness, Hizashi knows what Shouta is really thinking about. He's been thinking this since the Hosu incident first happened. "Is this about Oboro?" He asks, though it's really not a question.

Shouta's eyes slide over to meet Hizashi's, but he doesn't look angry, only tired. "Why do you always bring him up?"

"Because it's always about him," he offers, equally as soft. He stands and walks so he's right in front of his husband. "Midoriya is not Oboro, Shouta. You can't treat him like glass just because you think he's going to die the way he did."

Shouta doesn't give any other response besides a pained wince, and Hizashi almost feels bad for being so straightforward.

Hizashi places a hand on Shouta's, moving past the last topic quickly. "He still blames himself for Native."

"What?"

“He told me after you left. Tenya and Todoroki know he’s Rabbit now, and he thinks they blame him for everything that happened. He feels like they *should* blame him.” Hizashi lifts up his shoulders in a shrug. “He’s scared, Shouta. He’s downright terrified, and I fear that he hates himself even more than he already did. I hear him talking to himself sometimes, and it’s… it's scary. But him saying what he did to you that day at the hospital—he wasn’t in his right mind. You had to have known that. He was just overwhelmed.”

Shouta nods, but his face is still pinched. He’s obviously more concerned about the first part. “The two of them didn't snitch on Midoriya to Tsukauchi despite knowing.”

“Of course they didn’t. They’re his friends.”

Did you really think they would turn against him?

Shouta’s eyes move to the hallway, towards where Midoriya’s room is. He’s thinking hard—the crease between his brows gives it away. “I know I need to correct some of the things I said, but I don’t think he'll want to talk to me for a while yet.”

“Yeah, well, you’re just gonna have to figure it out, huh? ‘Cause I’m not fixing this for you this time, Sho. This is on you. I can’t keep playing the mediator.” He smiles a little. “I’m not the best at this whole… ‘looking after vigilantes’ thing, but I will always be there for the kiddo to talk to. He knows that, and I think he thought the same applied to you. I mean, he took you to that club he was so fond of, and he let you in on some of his secrets. But now that’s down the drain, and *that* is also on you.”

“Before the internship he told me he wanted to talk to me about something. One of his missions, he said. I doubt that still holds now, though.” Shouta’s eyes search Hizashi’s. “We need to watch him in case he gets any ideas.”

“Is it the one about the little girl? He didn’t go into detail with me, but I know that’s the one he’s worried about the most right now.”

“Little girl? It might be. We… I’ll have to ask him about it when he’s up to it.”

I wonder why it’s so important to him. He should be able to tell Tsukauchi about it, too. If it’s that time sensitive, he’ll need all the help he can get.

Shouta sniffs. “Naomasa thinks he has a lead on his father.”

This breaks Hizashi out of his thoughts. His brows fly up, and he cocks his head to one side. “His father? Well… I guess it’s gotta be good if he calls it a lead.”

“It’s a hunch, really. He told me he’s concerned about the way Midoriya acts, and apparently some of the stuff he’s said to Yagi lately has made the both of them uneasy. In other news, though, we’re both looking more into his mother’s disappearance. I think it’ll prove to be important in finding out key details about his father. We’ll just have to take things day by day for now.”

Hizashi makes a noncommittal noise. His hand leaves his husband’s, and he crosses the room to stand by the couches. Chewing on his bottom lip, he listens to the muffled city noises outside.

He hears Shouta approach from behind, but he doesn’t turn yet.

“You don’t look enthused,” Shouta says. It’s a prompt for more information, as it always is. When Hizashi doesn’t answer, Shouta hums. “You… don’t agree with what we’re doing.”

“It's not that. It’s just… the more I think about his mother, the more I’m not sure searching for her is even the right choice.”

“Hizashi, if the kid’s mother is out there and alive, we need to know about—”

“That’s the thing,” Hizashi interrupts, but he still sounds so soft. *“We* need to know. Not Midoriya. Scouring for more info on her—we’re doing that for *us,* not Midoriya. And that’s a problem. Shouta, even if we find her—and that’s already a slim chance considering the fact she hasn’t been seen in nearly a decade—how do we know her presence won’t do more harm than good? We don’t even know what her relationship with the listener was like, do we? It’s… dangerous.”

“He loved his mother, ‘Zashi. He only spoke of her in passing once or twice to me, but it was always with fondness.”

‘Is it bad that I think she did love her?’

Hizashi swallows the sudden bitter taste in his mouth. “We can love someone we should hate. We all make mistakes, especially when we’re young. When we don’t know any better.”

Midoriya is no different.

At this, Shouta pauses. Hizashi can feel him analyzing him in that specific way he does. Most times, Hizashi would think it's cute, but now he's only tired of it. Maybe he should've just gone to bed so he wouldn't have had to have this discussion with his partner.

It's only after Hizashi has heard the fifth car door slam of the night that Shouta responds.

"Do you remember when I came home that night and told you about what the kid asked me? After patrol?"

"You'll have to be more specific, Shouta, you've told me a ton of—"

"When he asked for my advice. About what to do when doctors tell you it's too late for them to do anything."

Immediately, Hizashi softens. "Yeah, I remember. I think about it often."

"I know. And that's… that's why I have to stop this."

"Stop what?" He stands in front of him again, holding his dark gaze. This close, he sees the whiskers on Shouta's jaw and wonders how long he's been growing it out. He probably hasn't had time to shave in a while. "What do you think he's doing, Shouta?"

"He's hurting himself, Hizashi. Every night he goes out? Every time he fights and strains and pushes himself beyond what he should be capable of? He's killing himself. Little by little. He's running himself into an early grave."

"And I told you that Rabbit isn't the cause of that. He will be doing that with or without the costume. You have to get past that fear, Shouta. Like I said, he's not going to become another Ob—"

"I know! I know, okay? But this is—this is what we can do to help. If he won't talk to us, if he won't confide in even *All Might,* we have no other choice."

Hizashi steps impossibly closer, and their clothes brush against each other. "You know, I haven't forgotten the times I've had to physically restrain you from partaking in certain missions by yourself, Shouta. Not too long ago, you were just like him."

"Exactly. I'm using my experiences to save him from my failures." He huffs. "But I'm being serious. He won't tell us anything, and we're

running out of time. If we find his mother, or at least dig up the truth about her, we'll find his father, too. And we'll have something to actually go off of. We can find out why he's been doing all this, why he's so scared of his old bastard and what that man is planning next, and everything else in between, too."

"And if it doesn't work?"

Shouta looks away. "We find another way."

"Like?" Hizashi asks.

The man before him shifts on his feet, and his eyes dart around. His next words are low, as if it's criminal to even say them aloud. "Nezu knows people who specialize in these kinds of situations. He told me they're good for getting others to… open up about their past. Without having to actually talk about it aloud."

Hizashi's muscles tense up as he connects the dots. "Sounds a little invasive, don't you think?"

"It's painless. They essentially get to walk around in the person's mind and search for whatever it is they're looking for. A lot of times, as long as the patient is cooperating, it doesn't take too long. It's… useful for victims of abuse or traumatized soldiers and heroes. I've heard it gives them relief."

"He won't like that."

"I know. But he doesn't *have* to be willing for it to work."

Hizashi's green eyes flash in the dim light. "Shouta."

"I'm not saying we should do it, or even that it's right. I'm just putting out another option for if this one fails us. We don't have a lot of time, Hizashi. From the way Midoriya was talking… things can crumble at any moment. We can't sit and wait for him to maybe give us some crumbs here and there. It's too risky."

The worst part about all of this is that Hizashi understands. He agrees with Shouta somewhat. He knows he's right. But it still doesn't make him feel any better. He works his jaw, wishing for a piece of gum to chew on. That always helps him when he's particularly anxious. "Then I guess we'll have to work fast so that option stays as just a last resort."

Relieved, Shouta seems to let out his breath. “Yeah. That’s what I’ve been working on these past few days.” Carefully, his arms loop around Hizashi, which is a first. He doesn’t usually initiate contact like that. “Are we taking him with us when we go to work tomorrow?”

“I feel he’ll have more to do at the school than he would here. He might appreciate it.”

Shouta seems to accept this answer, though he still looks as if he’s eaten something bitter. “Yeah. I’ll… try to talk to him when the timing’s right. See what I can do.”

Hizashi pecks his temple. “I’m glad. It’s about time you’ve realized your stupidity. But, just so you know, you’re sleeping on the couch until you fix this.”

I’ll be cold without you, but I’ll deal.

“Seriously?” Shouta groans into Hizashi’s neck, done with this conversation by now. “Come on. I thought you liked being next to me at night. I know *I* like being with *you.”*

Hizashi shakes his head, recognizing the rare words for what they are: sweet talk. It’s not often Shouta talks like that, and it makes Hizashi alert, but he pushes aside his excitement. “Nope. Don’t even. You have no right to complain after what you did. I think we both need some time to think.”

Eventually, Shouta concedes with a roll of his eyes, though it’s more playful than anything. It’s not like it’s the end of the world. Their couch is big enough to not be too uncomfortable. Sometimes Shouta finds himself on the couch by choice on certain nights anyway. That’s just the way their relationship works.

So Hizashi lets Shouta pull him in one more time, and when his hands travel, he kisses him deeper.

By the time he’s in bed with his hearing aids resting on the nightstand and one side of the mattress empty, his worries have been put to rest for a little while.

At least enough for him to get a few hours of sleep.

He knows he has his work cut out for him now. He has to get Midoriya to trust them at an even faster rate if he wants to have any hope of helping the boy out.

For everyone's sake.

"I'm just saying that you've all been letting this go on for too long."

"You're paranoid, Kan."

"Well, of course I am! Just look at what he's already done! I know you've all seen how the press is reacting to this! I told you that this kid was bad news, and now look at everything that's happened."

Izuku hears an irritated sigh, and he curls in on himself even further. The vent walls seem to tighten around him.

Cementoss sounds annoyed when he replies again. "We've already had a meeting to discuss what happened during Hosu. Midoriya did not kill Native. That's absurd to even suggest."

"There weren't any cameras working in that area, were there? How do we know he's telling the truth about that! Aizawa even told us at the very beginning that he's a skilled liar!"

Yamada speaks next. "You know what, I'm not even going to respond to what you just implied. But just so you're aware, Midoriya's story was backed up by Todoroki Shouto and Iida Tenya as well. Are you calling them liars, too?"

"They're his friends. Besides, they probably don't know what they saw. That night was traumatic for many reasons, so it's possible they don't remember what—"

A slam is heard. Izuku can visualize the textbook being dropped onto the desk clearly in his mind. Yamada's next words are sharp and laced with poison. "Are you serious?"

There's a speck of dust on the wall. It's stuck to the side of the polished metal, moving around as the air comes through. The light from the room below is the only thing that allows Izuku to see it so clearly.

Izuku lets his hand raise up with Pull manifesting on his fingertips.

He's not even concentrating as he would usually have to for an object this small, but the speck comes to him easily anyway, keeping the wall clean.

"Why are you so set on defending him, Yamada?" Vlad King is nearly shouting now. "You seem to have some issues with favoritism!"

Kayama is quick to intervene. "Favoritism?" She scoffs. "Come now, Kan, don't be so dramatic. If anything, you're the one who's been exhibiting a little bias here. You've clearly got an agenda."

"The only agenda I have is protecting my students. Allowing a damn criminal to roam these halls however he pleases with little to no real consequences whenever he steps out of line is the exact opposite of doing that."

The average adolescent heart beats around seventy times per minute. Izuku monitors his own heartrate for a period of fifteen seconds and estimates that his heart is beating at around one hundred times per minute. It's still within normal ranges, sure, but he has a feeling that number is going to keep increasing. He can't figure out how to stop the tightness in his chest.

He feels Yagi walk across the room, and he clings onto the feeling of his quirk. Their quirk, really. They technically share one and the same.

"What exactly is it you think Midoriya is going to do to his peers? There has to be a reason you're so worried. If I can maybe help assuage those fears, we can—"

"We don't know anything about him, Yagi! That's why I'm so upset."

The room goes silent. Izuku, who was expecting this in some form sooner or later, just counts another period of heart beats.

"I'm afraid I don't follow." Yagi most definitely has a confused look on his face; Izuku hears it in the tone he's using.

"He was on the streets for years. He forged legal documents just to keep his ass out of the system and out of jail. We know absolutely nothing about his father, or even his mother for that matter, so who's to say he's not making any of that up, either? This could be some cover of his!"

Cover? Izuku thinks about it for a second. From an outsider's

perspective, maybe that's not so farfetched. He is a little suspicious, in all fairness. Vlad King has a sharp mind. He's not so easily blinded by things.

No wonder he's a respected hero at such a prestigious school.

Kayama is not convinced. "What could the boy possibly have to gain from all this? Do remember how Shouta found him that night in his apartment building, Kan. Was that just a ploy, too? Meant to confuse us all?"

At this, Snipe pops in. "I've gotta agree with ya there. Considerin' the injuries he sustained, it's hard for me to believe he woulda done all that just to make himself less suspicious. I mean, sure, it's not impossible, but if we're to be realistic…"

"He has everything to gain by being undercover! Open up your eyes!" Kan is pacing the room now. His frustration clouds Izuku's mind. "Our personal information, our schedules, his classmates' strengths and weaknesses, insight on UA itself—the list goes on and on!"

A chair screeches as it gets pushed back. Yamada seems to be gathering his things. "You know what, I have work to do. I'm not going to sit here and listen to you insult my student when you have no idea what you're saying."

"Your student? How exactly is he yours? From what I'm seeing, you're barely even his English teacher saying as he's already fluent. He doesn't need you." He gives a huff. "And, again, he's a criminal. A vigilante who's caused more harm than good and who will continue to do so for the remainder of his life as long as you all keep him hidden and *coddled—"*

Yamada rounds on him. Their quirks indicate that they're close to each other now, barely a few feet away. " First and foremost, I'd appreciate it if you'd stop speaking about him as if he's some mass murderer, thanks. He is a child. You have a laughable argument, Kan. You have not been with him as long as I have. You haven't seen what I've seen!"

Just then, the door to the teacher's lounge opens, and Izuku loses count of his heart contractions once Vlad turns to the newcomer. "Nezu, why did you think giving Yamada the rights to Midoriya was a good idea? He has way too much personal attachment to him."

"How is caring about a child's safety considered being too attached!"

Vlad King goes right back to his argument. “Your priority should go to the safety of the kids at this school first. Your *actual* students, Yamada! Midoriya’s mere presence is a danger to them as it is also a breach of our—”

Nezu’s words seem small compared to everyone else’s. “Gentlemen, I must suggest we find another time and place to discuss—”

“Midoriya *is* a student!” Yamada says vehemently, ignoring his boss completely. Izuku’s heart does a little jump at that.

He needs them to stop arguing over this. He hates being the root of these disagreements. He hates causing this discourse between teachers who should be close given their line of work.

“Any child who goes to this school is a student of mine and all of the other teachers here. That is a fact.” Yamada moves impossibly closer to his coworker. Izuku pictures their slight height difference in his mind and shakes his head to clear it immediately. Out of everyone in this school, the last person he wants is for Yamada to get involved in something like this. He shouldn’t be defending him. “I understand you’re worried. I understand you’re scared that Midoriya could possibly be a danger or a threat to all the others here. I get that, believe me. I’m not so naive to have not even thought of that as a possibility.” He pauses, as if catching his breath or his bearings. Izuku reckons it’s both. “Your worries are not without reason. But what you cannot do is treat Midoriya like some scum of the earth criminal for things he hasn’t even done. He has made mistakes in the past, sure, but he has paid for them—hell, he is *still* paying for them! And everything he’s done has been with someone else's well-being in mind. He is not the threat we should be worrying about here and you know that.”

“Oh, please, he’s probably killed people before. So what if he didn’t actually do Native in this time? That doesn’t erase what he’s done in the past. What happens if word gets out that we’re harboring a vigilante? Are you going to hide him from the families who want retribution?”

Izuku winces. The vents seem to get colder all of a sudden. His arm tingles because of it, and his movements are jerky when he tries to get his soothing cream out of the small bag beside him. He’s not supposed to be here right now. He was confined to the floor for the rest of the week by Recovery Girl so as not to strain himself, but he didn’t want to be around people.

The first year heroic students are still at their internships, and they won't be back until next week. This week was deemed a 'break' for all students but the third years, who are still attending classes like normal to cram in their studies.

And so it's just Izuku, the third year students, and the teachers present at school at this time. The only reason the first year heroics teachers are here too is because they have to help the third years with mock villain trials.

Izuku wishes to avoid everyone, and the vents are the only certain safe place he knows of. Nezu is the only other person (mammal?) who frequents it, but he's been busy recently.

Still, the guilt wells up inside him, and his shaky hands drop his tub of cream so that it clangs against the metal flooring. The sound isn't too loud, but he still waits with his eyes tightly shut for any indication that they heard him.

He seems to be in the clear, though.

Ectoplasm is the first to respond. "Let's not fret about hypotheticals, yes?"

"The kid wouldnt harm a fly willingly, Kan, don't be stupid—"

There's another low scoff, and it cuts Kayama off. Izuku wouldn't have heard it if not for his enhanced senses. "There's still the possibility of a traitor in this school. Did you forget that?"

The tense silence that follows turns the air into liquid fire. Izuku isn't cold anymore.

Yamada breaks it first. "You can't actually be insinuating—"

"He's already been acting weird. And know that I hate saying this too but he could very well be involved with the villains that attacked us. He could be a—"

"A what? Spy?" Aizawa seethes. His voice is scathing and practically dripping with annoyance, yet somehow it seems perfectly controlled.

Izuku's eyes fly open. He didn't feel his quirk come into the room, nor did he feel any kind of emotion from him.

He didn't even know the man was in the lounge listening. He thought

he was out with the third years.

“Don’t act like I’m that incompetent, Kan. That’s the first thing I investigated when I learned of his identity. He’s not a damn spy, for Christ’s sake.” There’s a thud. Izuku bets it’s a coffee mug being set down. “Now, all of you need to shut up. You’re giving me a headache.”

Izuku inches forward from his spot and lowers his head to look through the tiny slits in the vents, hoping to see what’s happening.

Vlad doesn’t seem to want to quit just yet. “ You’re the last person I wanna hear from on this, Aizawa. You’ve been enabling his behavior all this time, and you’re not nearly as strict with him as you claim to be. If I were the one watching him, none of this would be happening, I can guarantee you—”

“You wanna be in charge of him so badly? Fine. Go right ahead.” The pause before Aizawa next speaks feels almost like the moment before you trip on a wire. “And every time you threaten him, every time you lay your hand on him—I’ll do it all back to you. Tenfold. Are we agreed?”

Before anyone can respond, Nezu finally takes control, obviously sensing the brewing storm. “If you two are interested in keeping your jobs, we will be issuing a rain check on this topic.”

Yagi breathes a sigh in relief. “Yes, please.”

“I seriously cannot be the only person here who thinks this entire situation is—”

“Vlad King,” Nezu starts, sickly sweet, and—just like that—the room is deadly silent. The principal is given the floor immediately.

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut again, not wanting to hear what the mammal has to say next. He doesn’t care for it. His gut is churning, and he hates this. Hates it because Vlad is *right.* Izuku *is* acting suspicious. He *did* fuck everything up back at Hosu.

If he were anyone else, he’d be rotting in the lower floors of Tartarus alongside his old mentor.

It’s not fair.

“I agree it is important to remember the threat of a traitor inside these

walls," Nezu begins. "The evidence is growing stronger with each passing day, so I do understand your concerns, Kan. Your dedication to your students is what makes you a superior hero. However, I also believe there are more pressing matters to tend to. Rabbit is an issue that we're taking care of, and rest assured that we will be ready if any… *unsavory* events do occur. We mustn't fear what we do not yet know. Is there anything you'd like to add?"

Kan is much more professional now. Izuku sees that his burly arms are crossed. "I just want to tack on a few more points. Rabbit—that *boy,* knows about Yagi's time limit. Whether or not he told him doesn't matter. Midoriya could be waiting for a chance to get him when he's at his weakest and kill—"

Izuku's vision blurs, and One for All stirs inside him, as if sickened at the mere thought of killing a predecessor.

At the same time, Yagi intervenes. "I've been training with Young Midoriya personally for a long time now. I know him more than most everyone here, so trust me when I say he's not like that. He has had countless opportunities to hurt me—and even to kill me. But he's *never* done such a thing. He's never so much as caused me to bleed. I told you all that I would vouch for him, and I still am. If you do not trust him, at least trust me."

Nezu nods in approval before glancing back at Vlad King. "Does that calm some of your nerves?"

"I'm never going to fully believe in Midoriya, so no. But if we're not going to turn him in, fine. Whatever happens will be on all of you." Kan shakes his head and makes his way to his seat. "But keep Midoriya away from my students. From *any* of the other students outside of his class, for that matter."

Cementoss hums. "I'm not sure how we're supposed to enforce that, but I think we can all agree on it for now. Just to get away from this discussion."

"I agree, then," Snipe says.

"Guess we've got no choice if we want you to shut up," Kayama mutters.

As the others voice their reluctant agreement, Izuku is painfully aware of Aizawa's silence.

Yamada is making his way toward the door again, his laptop in hand. “I won’t be having any part in that, but you do what you think is necessary, Kan. We’ll see how it works out.” He stops with his hand on the handle. “It’s wrong to even be having this conversation, especially in a place where the listener could very well overhear. The truth is that you're not making this any better. You expect him to trust us and hand over all his secrets just like that, and yet you treat him like he’s a villain.”

“He *is* —”

“A vigilante, maybe. But that *boy* is not a villain. I’d have hoped you would know the difference.”

Yamada walks out, leaving the others to ruminate in his wake. The words hang heavy in the air, and they taste acrid.

Izuku presses his palms to his eyes and wishes for the bad feeling in his chest to go away.

Sitting on top of one of the ledges high above the hallway floors, Izuku watches the third year students make their way to their next class. He listens to them joke and laugh with each other, and he writes down things he finds interesting in his notebook.

He knows that this isn’t helping his case. That sitting here and analyzing the newest generation of heroes doesn’t exactly scream *not-spy*.

Maybe he’s doing this on purpose. Maybe he isn’t.

Vlad King will just have to be a little more convincing.

Some of the students, although being around twenty feet beneath him, notice him watching. Some give him weird looks while others wave with big grins.

Izuku gives tiny waves back.

When the students have dispersed, leaving Izuku alone again, he drops

down from his outpost and takes out his little tubes of paint from his pockets. He changed into some overalls he found in the lost and found so as to not look as suspicious.

Putting on his stolen 7-Eleven hat, Izuku begins to sketch out where he wants his next painting to go on the bare wall before him. He's going to be good this time (if only because he doesn't have the mental capacity to be yelled at again) and only paint the UA logo. He won't be painting another dysfunctional Nezu tribute or uncircumcised dick. He's matured, thank you very much.

Izuku works as fast as he can, knowing that soon the halls will be flooded again. He starts with the rough outline for it, all done in black spray paint, and then he fills it all in with lemon yellow with a roller brush. He takes out a fan he stashed in one of the nearby janitor's closets and clicks it on, letting the first layer dry for a few minutes. Then he goes back over it with a brighter yellow, making sure to add in some glitter he found in Nezu's equipment stash. Except that doesn't work out so well, as the glitter doesn't mix evenly with the paint and ends up messing up the entire look.

So, Izuku goes searching for sparkly glitter paint. He's sure Power Loader has some. If not, Yamada might know where he could find some.

He scuttles around in Power Loader's storage units first and actually finds a nice golden glitter paint canister in the fifth one he breaks into. He figures it'll do nicely.

He returns and finishes the second and third layers, and then he goes over the outline in thicker lines, wanting to really make the logo stand out.

Just for fun, he uses green and red to make a sort of glitchy-3D effect —which he hates immediately after he finishes it.

"Damn," he says aloud while staring at his work, unimpressed. It's fifteen feet across and fifteen feet wide. It's perfectly proportionate and symmetrical, with incredibly straight lines, but it just looks kind of stupid to him.

Maybe he should've gone with the dicks.

Nah, that was getting old, a voice says to him.

"Yeah," Izuku mumbles after a few seconds. "I thought so too."

He begins to go over the red and green paint, getting rid of the effect he made. He decides to replace each of those strokes with flying animals. He paints tiny kittens, rats, bunnies, hyenas, and more. Some of them have angel wings while others have dark, torn wings.

He doesn't realize he's giving them color palettes associated with pro heroes until there's a throat being cleared behind him.

"Is that one Best Jeanist, my boy?"

Izuku startles so hard that he drops the paintbrush and nearly falls off the precarious ladder he put together. The tube of paint he was holding clatters to the ground, spurting out navy blue paint.

His head snaps around to see All Might standing with a thoughtful expression as he takes in what Izuku made, and it's only then that the teen realizes he *did* feel his quirk before now, he just didn't process it. He was too stuck in his own little world.

Dammit. I've gotta stop doing that. Focus, you idiot. What if he was a bad guy?

Izuku gulps and chuckles nervously, lifting up his hands innocently—only to realize he has paint smeared all over them. He hides them behind his back and grins with all his teeth. "Hey, All Might! How long have you been there? You know, the craziest thing just happened. I woke up from a nap just now and suddenly I'm—I'm just here! How crazy is that? I must've been framed. Anyway, I should get going before someone gets the wrong idea." He drops down from the ladder and slides away, giving a little salute. "I need to do some homew—"

"You shouldn't feel ashamed. This really is quite spectacular."

Izuku halts in his tracks. When he looks back, Yagi is still looking at the painting. He has his head tipped, and his eyes are narrowed in thought. It confuses Izuku to no end. "Uh, I don't think—"

"This only took you, what, an hour? Maybe a little less? It's brilliant." He walks closer, neck craning so he can still see everything. "Even though your hands aren't at their best, I can't say I see even one crooked line."

Izuku stares. Yagi is wearing a suit, but it's not his usual yellow one. It's a deep green with jagged stripes. Formal, yet still containing a bit of personality. Izuku likes it.

He doubts Yagi does, though.

Right now, Yagi feels calm. There's an undercurrent of concern there, along with exasperation, but it feels as though those are remains from earlier that day. Izuku can't sense any dominant emotions within his mentor, and he's not sure if that's a good or a bad thing.

"Speaking of hands," All Might continues, giving Izuku a sidelong glance when he comes back closer. "I specifically remember multiple doctors telling you not to strain your arms."

Izuku flushes. "I wasn't straining, sensei. I would've stopped if it became too much."

"I'm sure. Well, besides that. I was looking for you, Midoriya. I was wishing to ask if you wanted to have lunch and talk, but I see that you're… probably not in the mood."

The sudden shift has Izuku frowning. "Huh?"

"You look distracted, my boy. Are you okay? You're swaying."

He's swaying? No, he can't be. He thought he had a better handle on his behaviors like that. He's usually better at it.

"You're pale as a ghost, too. Are you nauseous?" Yagi's large hand comes up to press against Izuku's forehead, but the boy ducks away.

"Oh, I'm fine! Better than fine. It's just been a tiring day, y'know? Ectoplasm assigned this huge personal project to me, and I kinda worked on it all day, so!" He rubs the back of his neck, looking at the floor. "That's all."

"You're not sick?" All Might says, as if to make sure.

"No, sir! I'm, uh, I don't get sick often. Didn't I tell you that? If I didn't, I'm telling you now. I don't ever get sick except for, like, big diseases or whatnot. It's all thanks to my metabolism."

When Izuku glances up, Yagi has a grim look on his face. "You overheard, didn't you? This morning."

Oh.

Izuku jerks, and his mouth opens and closes like a fish out of water. *Don't lie,* he tells himself. He kicks down the urge. *Don't. Don't do it.*

Panic hits him quickly, along with his guilt, but then All Might places his hands on Izuku's shoulders and holds him tight. "It's alright. I'm not upset. I… had a feeling you weren't far away. It's not like we were being quiet, either. I'm so sorry you had to hear that, Young Midoriya, kid."

"It's okay," Izuku says, on autopilot. His muscles have stiffened up in his hold. "I was eavesdropping. 'S kinda my fault."

"This is not on you. I need you to understand that tensions are really high after all of the recent villain attacks. Vlad King just doesn't want anything to—"

At the mention of the other teacher, Izuku's throat closes up. He pulls away with surprising ease and shrugs. "You don't have to explain, Yagi. I understand! Really. I'm not, uh, offended or anything. I mean, I'd think the same things in y'all's positions. It's really okay!"

"I don't think it is," Yagi argues, hand reaching out for him.

Izuku continues to back away. "I've gotta decline the lunch offer, sensei. I'd love to, but I do have to finish that project. It's for Ectoplasm's research so… y'know. It's really important. I'll catch you later, though!"

Yagi calls after him, but Izuku ignores him. He sprints down the hallway with red lightning following in his wake. He leaves Yagi and his unfinished painting behind.

He doesn't think he'll ever go back to finish it.

Chapter End Notes

aizawa and yamada need a date :)

also, it's still september at the time of me writing this, so I just wanted to really quickly remind y'all to be nice to others. september was suicide awareness month, so I feel it's especially important nowadays to show friends, family, and even strangers as much support and genuineness as you would want for yourself. times are tough, so pls be sure to leave a positive impact on the world around you. i associate september with mental health, so this also means to take care of yourself too, not just those around you. if you can help one person, even if it's just yourself, that'll be enough. i don't mean to leave this note off so negatively haha, especially since this is definitely not usually what I post, but I feel

this is a conversation we need to normalize so we can all feel less alone. i know ive been surrounded by a bit of death myself recently so i just want to let others know that no one is alone.

anyway hope you enjoyed the chap, ik it was on the shorter side :) I'll hopefully have another update soon

b

tolerance

Chapter Notes

> did y'all see the first ep for s6 omg omg omg im shaking aizawa looked so good ok im 🕶

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're going to hurt yourself like that."

To say Hitoshi screams is an understatement. He almost jumps out of his skin, a near inhuman kind of screech leaving his lips when he turns and comes face-to-face with the newcomer.

A boy with messy green hair and freckles for days stares back at Hitoshi. He has wide, glittery bottle green eyes, and immediately they have him hooked.

He knows this kid.

"Oh my *God!"* Hitoshi says, scrambling back to get away from Midoriya—who is currently hanging upside down from the goddamn ceiling as if he's some Spider-Man wannabe. And, c'mon, this cannot be good for his health. The ceiling is a good thirty feet above the floor, so Hitoshi is left with many questions.

One: how the hell did he manage to get up there? Two: where did he get that extremely long capture weapon (which looks suspiciously like a copy of Aizawa-sensei's own) that he's using to hold himself above the floor? Three: how long has he actually been up there? And four: *why* is he subjecting himself to that? Hitoshi can visibly see the blood rushing to the boy's head.

"You—you're not supposed to be here!" Hitoshi stutters out, nearly falling on his ass in his haste to put some more distance between them. "I thought the hero students were all out doing internships!"

That's what Aizawa told him, and he would know for sure, so why is *this* kid here? In the private gym that only he and Aizawa use for training nowadays? The very same gym that Aizawa was supposed to meet Hitoshi in… five minutes ago?

"Mine was canceled," Midoriya says, tilting his head. "Y'know, Hosu and all."

Hitoshi shakes his head. “That still doesn’t explain why you—why you’re here. Why aren’t you, like, at your *house!”*

In one smooth move, Midoriya flips himself so he’s on his feet and yanks the capture weapon down toward him. It comes loose from where it was tied to one of the beams near the ceiling and lands in a neat coil around his neck.

Yeah. It’s definitely like the ones Aizawa has.

For a moment, Hitoshi is envious. He wants that scarf. It would just be so cool to have it.

“Because being stuck here is much more fun than being out in the free world, obviously,” is the reply he gets, and is it just Hitoshi or does the boy sound a little sarcastic? “But where else would I be able to see *you,* Shinsou?”

At the mention of his own name, Hitoshi gulps. He’s been so focused on training lately that Midoriya hasn’t really crossed his mind since, well, the festival. He kind of forgot all about him. Immediately, Hitoshi sort of feels bad. If it weren’t for Midoriya, he probably wouldn’t have been given this chance with Aizawa, right? He wouldn’t have been inspired to search for the spot.

Maybe he should be a little nicer.

“Well, now it’s my turn! What are *you* doing here?”

Actually, no. He doesn’t want to be nicer. Hitoshi is on the defensive immediately, and he feels his cheeks redden. “What, am I not allowed here or something? I can train myself if I want.”

Midoriya blinks, his expression unreadable. He has that same uncanny look to him that Hitoshi first noticed upon seeing him that day in the hallway. “Never said you couldn’t. I was just curious, saying as you don’t exactly look like you know what you’re doing.” His eyes fall lower, landing on Hitoshi’s half-wrapped hands. “You have bruises on your knuckles. Looks like they hurt.”

“What the hell are you talking a—”

Midoriya steps closer, and Hitoshi’s breath leaves him. “You’re getting that hurt because you’re not wrapping yourself correctly.” Something mischievous flashes across his eyes. “Did Aizawa-sensei not teach you how to properly do it?”

Hitoshi jerks, blinking rapidly. “No! No, he did! I—I was just doing it quickly! It’s—” He cuts himself off when he notices his breathing getting faster. Who does this boy think he is, asking that kind of question about him? Isn’t Aizawa his homeroom teacher? Now Hitoshi is on the defensive again, but this time for Aizawa’s sake. “Of course he did. But what’s it to you? You still shouldn’t be here, so why are you even talking to me?”

And how do you even know he trains me now?

Midoriya completely ignores him. Hitoshi turns and attempts to stalk away, wanting to move to the other side of the gym to get away from him, but Midoriya grabs his hand.

His head snaps back, and he’s about to ask just what the *fuck* he thinks he’s doing when suddenly the wraps are yanked off him. “Hey—!”

Midoriya is holding his wrist, and his grip is strong but not at all hurtful. Even without using his quirk (at least as far as Hitoshi can tell), Midoriya is *strong.* He figures he shouldn’t be surprised, as he already fought him before and got absolutely annihilated, but he is. He’s so dumbfounded that for a moment he stops trying to yank his hand away, and he doesn’t even smack him like he was planning to.

He just stands there like a fool as Midoriya hooks the loop over his thumb and wraps it around the back of his hand.

“A good hand wrap should make you feel secure in knowing that you can hit something at full force without injuring your knuckles and joints,” Midoriya says, and his voice is monotone, as if reciting something. “That kind of security is critical when you’re fighting someone. You can’t afford to hesitate.”

Hitoshi stares back and forth between Midoriya and his work. *Yeah, that’s what Aizawa told me.*

“It’s always good to start by going across the back of your hand so that when you make a fist it kind of clinches up the beginning of the wrap. It gives more compression, and that’s what you’re looking for.”

Midoriya’s hands glide over Hitoshi’s skin, and he can’t help but notice how calloused and scarred the other boy’s palms are. They’re rough and bumpy. If Hitoshi squints hard enough, he swears he sees them shaking. This makes Hitoshi look back up at him with wide eyes. Is he saying all of this from experience or something?

“Now you can wrap your knuckles.” He shrugs. “I used to do mine three times, and that worked well enough for me. But be sure to wrap up high enough, like just under the first knuckle so that when you make a fist, the punching surface is padded, not just your knuckles, you know? That’s where you were going wrong before.”

Hitoshi swallows. “Used to? You don’t do them like that anymore?”

Midoriya’s eyes flick up to meet his, and they narrow when he smiles. “I don’t usually wrap my hands at all nowadays. Figured there’s no use when they just kept getting burned off when I hit my opponents.”

What the hell? Hitoshi stares. “Who were you fighting that could burn off hand wraps like that? The ones the school provides are supposed to be the best quality out there.”

“Sure, but they’re not exactly fire-resistant,” Midoriya says off-handedly. “If the fire is hot enough, they will burn up. But even without fire, when I hit too hard it all splits apart anyway due to the force.”

“How have you not broken all of your bones already?” Hitoshi asks before he can stop himself.

Midoriya doesn’t seem to mind, though. He continues wrapping with practiced ease, though he’s doing it slowly so Hitoshi can follow. “My body can take a beating up to an extent. I’ve been working on a skintight gauntlet for people with strength enhancement quirks like me, though, so we don’t have to worry about that.”

How is it that Hitoshi never thought of this issue before? It’s so obvious, but he just didn’t think of it. Of course people like Midoriya would have trouble fighting safely like others can. Huh.

“I wonder if All Might has the same issue,” Hitoshi mutters, mostly to himself.

Izuku perks up. “He actually does, but it’s at a smaller level. The reason he’s so big and buff is so he can absorb more of the impact from his punches. If he were, say, even fifty pounds less than he is, he would blow himself apart. Plus, he’s had years of experience to build up stronger bones. I mean, once you break them they *do* grow back stronger, so he kind of is indestructible to most hand-to-hand attacks. If you want to really hurt All Might, the fastest way is to use something sharp and fast to pierce directly through—”

“Okay!” Hitoshi interrupts, wincing. “I don’t need to know that.”

Jesus.

“Well, it’s not like I’m giving away a weakness or anything. All Might-sensei is way too fast to let anyone hit him like that.” Midoriya taps Hitoshi’s thumb to get him to look back at what he’s doing. “Anyway. Once you do the knuckles, cross over the back of your hand again and wrap around your wrist three times. Come up and across your palm and then loop the wrap halfway around your thumb. Go back across your palm, over the back of your hand, and then secure the thumb by looping the wrap halfway around it from the other direction.”

Midoriya continues on, instructing Hitoshi on where to go from there. He tells him how to wrap between each individual knuckle and how to create an anchor with his forearm and wrist, and he makes sure Hitoshi is looking the entire time.

Aizawa does this part a little differently. I guess it depends on preference and aim. Midoriya’s wrap seems to be mostly for keeping the bones in the hand protected and stable.

“Now, if you have a lot of leftover wrap, you can cross back and forth over the back of your hand to make an ‘x’ pattern. If you can't complete three or more of these around your wrist, your wraps might be too small. This one looks perfect though. But just for future reference, if you have a lot of extraneous wrap, you should get a shorter one. Too much will prevent you from making a good, tight fist, y’know?”

Hitoshi nods, even though he’s more focused on Midoriya now rather than on what he’s doing. “Uh, yeah.”

“Good! Now try and do your other hand.”

Hitoshi takes the other wrap Midoriya holds out to him and begins to follow the instructions he was given. It doesn’t take long, as Hitoshi is a fast learner, but he does ask for some help a couple of times. Soon, though, both of his hands are properly wrapped and secure. “Thanks,” he mutters, staring at his wraps with a kind of excitement bubbling up inside him.

“‘Course!” Midoriya takes a few steps back. “Now come at me.”

“Huh?”

The other teen gestures for him to come forward. “Hit me! I wanna see if you can notice the difference.”

Hitoshi hesitates. He blinks, looks around, and then frowns. “Won’t we get in trouble?”

He gets a giggle in response. “For what?”

“For training without supervision? Aizawa said hero students aren’t allowed to practice with each other unless they’re given permission first and are watched.”

Midoriya lifts a brow. It’s only then that Hitoshi notices that that too is a dark green. It’s not black like he first thought upon looking at him. “We’re not training. We can say we’re just *sharing skills.”* The boy gets into a defensive stance, an eager gleam to his eyes. “We can use our quirks, if you want. I know you probably want to try yours on me again.”

Hitoshi blanches. Honestly? The thought of using his quirk didn’t even cross his mind. He’s asked a few questions before now, and Midoriya has answered them without hesitance despite knowing what Hitoshi could do. It seems neither of them really cared at the moment. For Hitoshi, there’s just something about the other teen that makes him feel… different. Exhilarated.

Seeing Midoriya’s readiness to train with him makes all of Hitoshi’s past qualms and jealousy fade away. He looks genuine, and Hitoshi knows that that could just be a ploy, but somehow he truly doubts it.

Awkwardly, Hitoshi moves into the position Aizawa taught him a couple weeks ago. He raises his fists up, making sure his feet are at the right angles, too, and nods to show he’s ready.

Midoriya opens his mouth, as if about to say something, but just then the doors to the gym open up.

Oh, shit.

He almost forgot that Aizawa was supposed to be joining him. Since the man was running late, it slipped Hitoshi’s mind.

He whips around, nearly stumbling in his haste. “Aizawa!” He exclaims, attempting to straighten up into a more presentable position. “You’re here!”

“Yeah,” the man says, crossing the distance between them slowly with his bag full of supplies. He has his hair up in a bun again today, but instead of his normal gym attire he has his hero costume on—though no capture weapon. “My meeting ran late, so I apologize.”

“It’s fine,” Hitoshi says, flexing his hands down by his sides. He’s nervous for some reason even though he hasn’t really done anything wrong yet. “It’s no issue.”

“Who were you talking to?”

Hitoshi’s world comes to a screeching halt. “Huh? He’s—”

When Hitoshi turns to confusedly point Midoriya out, he’s surprised to find that there’s *no Midoriya to look at.* The teen has simply disappeared, though (given by the way the second set of exit doors on the opposite side of the gym are still swaying from being moved) Hitoshi guesses it’s not actually a magician’s trick. He just fucking ran.

I didn’t even feel or hear him leave. Wow.

That’s kind of scary.

But what’s even scarier is the look on Aizawa-sensei’s face when the man takes notice of the capture weapon that’s coiled up in an unceremonious heap on the floor. Right where Midoriya was previously standing, to be exact.

Aizawa stalks over and picks it up, shaking the dirt off of it before allowing it to maneuver itself onto his neck in a similar fashion to how Midoriya did it. Aizawa, however, is much faster with it, being more experienced. “Damn that kid,” he hisses quietly to himself, as if not meaning for Hitoshi to hear it at all. “I’ve been looking for this for hours.”

Immediately, the pieces fall into place, and Hitoshi wants the floor beneath him to just swallow him up. “Oh my God, sensei. I—I didn’t know that was yours. I thought it was a copy he had!” He involuntarily shrinks back when Aizawa’s gaze turns to him. “I‘m—”

Aizawa raises a hand. “Don’t. It’s not on you to correct other students.” He sets his bag on the ground. “We need to get a move on to make up for the lost time. I’m thinking we’ll focus on endurance training.”

Again?

The abrupt change of topic nearly gives Hitoshi whiplash, though he's not about to complain. It's obvious it's not his business what Midoriya is up to, so he won't pry.

"I can see you already stretched. Did you do your five laps?" Aizawa asks.

"Yeah. It's just, uh, I thought we were gonna spar today." He gestures with his wrapped hands, hoping he hasn't come off as disappointed or irritated. "That's what you told me last time, I think."

"I did?" Aizawa furrows his brows. He looks distracted, but it disappears the moment Hitoshi notices it. "That's fine, we can do that instead. I'm sure that's what you've been waiting for the past week."

Hitoshi nods, not even going to deny it. He appreciates the endurance training and the heroic studies, but *this* stuff is what he was really going after. He needs to know how to fight in case his quirk doesn't work—like with Midoriya at the festival. If he had some background skills then, he might've been able to pull a fast one on his opponent.

It doesn't take long before Hitoshi is covered in sweat. He's on his back on the blue mats, trying to catch his breath for the fiftieth time in about as many minutes. When they started fighting, Aizawa told him to just come straight for him, similar to how Midoriya did. It seems Aizawa likes to first see what the misconceptions and faults are and where they start, and only then does he teach and correct the mistakes. So when Hitoshi dashed towards him and threw an awkward, sloppy punch, the man turned and let him hit his shoulder.

Without making any sort of sound, even though Hitoshi was certain it must've hurt somewhat, Aizawa straightened up and showed him what he should've done instead.

He also showed him how to throw a better punch, though that one was a more hands-on lesson. To be able to hit someone with as much potential as you can, you must first know what it's like to be on the receiving end.

Hitoshi's chest still hurts from Aizawa's first punch.

But now, after over an hour of straight sparring and discussing different methods of fighting, Hitoshi is exhausted. His body is buzzing, and he feels electrified.

Aizawa is barely even sweating, though. While Hitoshi is busy trying

not to die on the floor, Aizawa is drinking some water off to the side and checking his phone, almost like this is a daily occurrence for him.

With a class of hero students to train, Hitoshi guesses it probably is.

I've gotta catch up fast if I want to have any chance at transferring.

When he's caught his breath and Aizawa has suggested they call it a day, as he doesn't want to push him too far, Hitoshi checks his own phone, too.

It's another hour or two before school ends for the students, so he still has some time before he'll be expected home. He can hang around for a bit, as Aizawa said the others won't mind. As long as he doesn't disrupt anything, that is.

Hitoshi's phone vibrates in his hand. His interest piques when he sees it's a notification from that one hero news outlet he follows online. They've made another post.

His heart gives a little clench when he reads the title, however. They've been using the same topic for the past few days, and they won't retire it. But, really, why would they?

Hero Public Safety Commission President refuses comment on news of Vigilante Rabbit's worst crime yet—

The title alone has Hitoshi wincing. He wonders briefly if these writers ever get tired of saying the same thing over and over and nitpicking everything they can find about Rabbit. This is probably how they get their thrills, though.

Out of the corner of his eye, Hitoshi sees Aizawa glance at him. His teacher must see the look on his face and the page he has open on his phone, as he turns away and begins to run his fingers through his hair, stretching like a cat. "I wouldn't read from that news company. They've been corrupt for a while."

At Hitoshi's questioning gaze, Aizawa continues.

"For one of my first real missions as a pro hero, I was tasked with taking down a villain with a mental broadcasting quirk. She could make people see things that weren't there, hear things that didn't exist, and even remember things that never happened. She was dangerous, not because of the quirk itself, but because of how she used it." Aizawa wipes his face with a wet wipe and tosses Hitoshi the

pack so he can get a fresh one. “Well, she worked at that same news station you’re reading from, and at the time I thought it was a cover for her, but it wasn’t. We—my partner and I—were under the impression she was the one pulling all the strings and deals behind the curtains. I figured out, though, that she was just being used by the company CEO. He was the one actually doing all the illegal shit.”

Hitoshi sits up and crosses his legs. “What did they do?”

“Weapons dealing, money laundering, manufacturing of quirk steroids, you name it. They were a nasty lot. Still are.”

“You didn’t stop it?” Hitoshi asks, frowning.

Aizawa shrugs with one shoulder, seemingly unbothered. “I took down the broadcasting villain and got her to confess for her own crimes, but she claimed the CEO had nothing to do with it. She covered for him, and unfortunately we didn’t have any concrete evidence to get him in court. He had too many connections.”

“That sucks,” Hitoshi says, looking away now. He’s not naive; he knows the legal system is flawed and a lot of people—specifically rich and powerful people—are usually exempt from punishment. But he didn’t think it could be that bad. He would’ve thought that out of everyone, Aizawa would have been able to catch the CEO. “Does he still work there?”

“He does, but the allegations never truly went away. That’s why most anyone that matters anymore knows that anything that comes outta that company isn’t credible. So I wouldn't trust anything they say if I were you. Ignore them.”

“Gotcha,” he says, nodding. “Uh, what happened to the other villain? Did she go to prison?”

“She was sentenced to thirty years. But I’d say it was… maybe a little less than ten years ago that a break in happened at the prison she was sent to. Some of the criminals escaped, including her. She was found a couple cities over, though, in full hysterics. Claimed she couldn’t use her quirk anymore. That it wasn’t even there.”

“Was she delusional?”

“We couldn’t tell, but that was a while ago. I’m not sure where she is now.”

Hitoshi mulls over this for a moment. “I hope the CEO guy gets what’s coming for him.”

“Eventually, he might,” Aizawa concedes. He takes another sip of water. “Who knows, maybe you might get him where I failed.”

At this, Hitoshi laughs, hand coming up to rub at his neck. “Yeah, I’m not so sure.”

Aizawa doesn’t respond, but Hitoshi doesn’t mind. He’s still looking at the article on his phone. Even though he knows now, of course, that he shouldn’t be getting this upset over it, he still is. When he thinks of Rabbit, he can only imagine the same Rabbit that fought against an entire foster care system to free Hitoshi and the others from their control. He can only picture the Rabbit he ran into that night and used his quirk on.

The same Rabbit who stupidly asked Hitoshi to put him back under the control of Brainwash.

Hitoshi doesn’t see him as anything else. He can’t. Because that green-haired, doe-eyed boy he talked to just can’t be the same person who took advantage of a city-wide crisis and murdered a pro hero. What would he even have to gain from that? Maybe Hitoshi is part of the problem. Maybe he needs to check himself for not believing the others, but he just needs to make sure.

If it comes out that Rabbit did do those things, Hitoshi honestly doesn’t know what he’ll do.

Staring at the lights above, Hitoshi ventures out on a limb. “Do you really think he did all that?”

It’s funny how Aizawa doesn’t need to ask who he’s talking about. “Did what? Kill Native?”

“Yeah.”

“Why are you asking me?”

“I don’t know,” Hitoshi answers honestly. “I just thought you would… have a better guess than I do.”

The gym is silent except for the whirring of the mechanical model fighters in the corner of the large room. Hitoshi hopes he can use those in the future. He hasn’t seen them in action yet.

Eventually, Aizawa speaks with a low voice. “No. I don’t believe he did.”

Hitoshi practically sags with relief. “Me neither. It doesn’t seem like he, uh, has it in him, I think. To do that sorta stuff.”

“No,” Aizawa corrects. “He does have it in him. But I think Rabbit is also a kid with a heart to rival All Might’s. He would never go that far without a good reason. That’s been his whole brand since the get-go.”

“Yeah. He seems really nice. A little weird, maybe, but… I don’t think that necessarily means he’s a murderer.”

“You sound like you know him,” Aizawa says, side-eyeing him.

Great. For a moment there, Hitoshi forgot who he was talking to. It’s rare that Aizawa is this talkative and, well, *friendly,* so it’s no wonder Hitoshi ended up talking a little too much. He needs to remember that this is still a pro hero and a teacher at a heroics school.

He’s probably been researching Rabbit for a while, so if Hitoshi admits to meeting the vigilante before and not telling someone about it, what would happen? Will he get in trouble?

Hitoshi doesn’t want to get in trouble. Not so soon after being allowed to work privately with Aizawa. He might lose that privilege.

“Uh, no! Not at all! I don’t even know his name or what he looks like. Same as you, right?”

Aizawa just hums, not looking at him.

Hitoshi doesn’t know what to make of that. Does he believe him? Is he giving Hitoshi a chance to tell the truth? To say more?

Curse Hitoshi’s big fucking mouth for landing him in this spot in the first place. If he rats himself out, he might get in trouble for not doing more to apprehend Rabbit or to at least tell someone about what happened. If he says nothing, though, and Aizawa finds out later…

No. He trusts Aizawa. Even if it’s just a little. He’s the only teacher who has ever given him a sliver of a chance to achieve his dreams. The only teacher to *ever* not look at him with envy or disgust.

Hitoshi takes a deep breath. “Actually, I ran into him one night. A while ago.”

Aizawa stops packing up his supplies and turns back to him fully. One of his eyebrows is raised. “Go on.”

And so, with his stomach doing somersaults, Hitoshi tells him. He leaves out some of the more personal details, like why he was out at that time of night in the first place, and only sticks to the important information. He tells Aizawa how Rabbit literally came falling from the sky and landed in the dumpster, and how Hitoshi activated his quirk on him on instinct in case he was a villain. He goes on to describe how the other boy was quite literally sewing up a stab wound on his stomach during their conversation—which nearly made Hitoshi throw up in his mouth.

The entire time, Aizawa’s face remains expressionless. He waits until the end to speak, voice monotone. “He asked you to use your quirk on him a second time?”

“Yeah.”

He snorts. “That was foolish. He had no way of knowing what your intentions were. He’s as stupid as they come.”

Hitoshi cracks a smile. “He was curious about how it worked. Said he, er, liked the way it felt.” He recalls Rabbit’s words then, and a blush makes its way onto his cheeks. “Nobody has ever said that to me before.”

“Right,” Aizawa says, unimpressed by Hitoshi’s reaction. “And you said he was stabbed?”

“Uh, yeah! He was running away from a fight, I think. He didn’t tell me what it was about or who they were, but he was definitely fleeing the scene of something. He was in pretty rough shape.”

Aizawa sighs. “‘Course. I’d expect nothing less.” When he meets Hitoshi’s gaze again, his eyes are intense. His next words almost feel like a warning. “Well, I’m not going to blame you for how you reacted then. But in the future, if you ever see Rabbit again, go in the opposite direction, got it? You don’t want to get associated with that.” Briefly, he looks up at the ceiling high above. “Stay away from him.”

Hitoshi dips his head, relieved at having gotten off easy. “Yes, sensei.”

The topic shifts back to Hitoshi’s training, then. Aizawa tells him that it’s pretty clear he’s been getting stronger, and that because of his fast development they’ll be able to incorporate his quirk fully into the next

practice.

Which Hitoshi honestly just can't wait for.

"Again, you can hang around here for as long as you like, but just be careful around the third years," Aizawa says, leading him out of the gym. "They might trample you."

Hitoshi sneers. "I doubt that."

When they lapse into a silence, just walking down the hall, Hitoshi feels a random burst of courage.

"Y'know, sensei," he begins, tone as non-threatening as possible in case this goes wrong. "It kinda sounds like you know Rabbit, too."

Or, at least, you did.

The man says nothing and only continues walking, but Hitoshi doesn't miss the way he tucks his chin into his scarf again.

He only does that to hide whatever he's thinking, Hitoshi is sure.

In another moment, Aizawa holds out his palm and moves it up in a *who knows* gesture, telling Hitoshi that that's the end of that conversation.

Huh. Maybe Hitoshi will ask him again later.

Access denied. Authorization required.

Izuku's eye twitches. He takes another sip of his stolen energy drink and types away on the keyboard. He managed to con Principal Nezu into giving him some of his extra tower parts to add onto the one Yamada and Aizawa are letting him use at the apartment, so the computer runs ridiculously fast now. He even added two more monitors to make things more organized.

It's a beast. Even better than the one he handmade back at his old place, which is saying something!

He presses Enter, but the same message pops up, making him grit his teeth. “You bitch,” he hisses at the words, straightening up.

He’s going to lose him.

Izuku clicks to another tab, watching with growing anger as this one automatically refreshes and denies him access too.

Come on, come on, why are you being so difficult…

The live security camera feeds that he’s attempting to gain access to have night vision, so he was finally able to see Overhaul in clear picture. He was actually getting somewhere tonight, he thought, but now that’s ruined. Their false safes must be taking action, as that’s the only reason why he would be kicked out of the loop so suddenly.

After thirty more minutes of failed attempts to get the feed back on, Izuku grips his hair between his fingers and has to pull a pillow towards him to scream into so he won’t make Aizawa and Yamada come running in.

He was so *close* to getting some good, concrete evidence, but of course life doesn’t allow him even that. Overhaul was attending a very important meeting with a potential business partner, and they were discussing (from what Izuku could gather from the few minutes he overheard) plans for more quirk drugs.

Izuku isn’t sure what kind they are, or even what they do, but he knows they’re dangerous.

He hasn’t seen the little girl—Eri, he remembers—in a while, so he also isn’t even sure if she’s alright. If she’s away from Overhaul, he’d like to think she is, but what if she’s somewhere worse? With someone even more cruel and mysterious?

Izuku paces the bedroom, restless. He sends a text to one of his old clients to see if they have any information on any recent quirk drug dealings, but other than that there’s not much he can do for now.

He swipes his journal off the little shelf under his bed and begins to scribble in it, writing down today’s date and the time that Overhaul arrived at the scene. He records every word he can remember them saying, and he makes sure to add details on what each person was wearing in hopes of identifying them later.

He’s been keeping track of everything related to Overhaul: the man’s

social status, his rank, his movements, what makes him tick—all of what he can find. Izuku even went so far as to scour old networks and scans of newspapers to see if he could get more information on the new heir to the Yakuza.

So far, he doesn't have much of anything too incriminating. Nothing that will help Izuku inside of his facility, specifically. Where his base of operations is exactly, Izuku isn't sure, but he plans on finding out soon.

Izuku finishes off the energy drink and crumples it before tossing it into his makeshift recycle bin.

He honestly can't think of a better way to spend his time while under house arrest—besides maybe doing his actual fucking job as Rabbit and researching the Overhaul case out in the damn *field* like he's supposed to be doing, but besides that.

If he were allowed to go patrolling, he would be able to scout things out for himself. He wouldn't have to rely on camera footage and shitty firewalls. He would be able to do what he was always meant to do: search, find, and destroy.

It's much harder when he can't be physically out there. He's losing precious time here, and in doing so he's putting everyone at risk. What will happen if those drugs get manufactured and shipped out? Who will it hurt? What will Overhaul do next? What about Eri?

There's that one specific hero team on the case, sure, but they've been silent for weeks. Izuku isn't even sure if they're still investigating! He can't just rely on them to do the job.

Izuku has to step up.

This probably isn't the worst situation, Izuku can admit. Being put on house arrest (he's not calling it being grounded, thank you very much) sucks, as does having his costume taken away, but it could most definitely be worse.

While he, Yamada, and most of the other teachers are quickly becoming even closer during their extended time together, he and Aizawa are becoming the opposite.

Izuku leaves rooms when Aizawa enters them. He doesn't talk to him, afraid his resentment and anger may just escape him if he does, and when he absolutely has to reply to him, his words are short and stated

in a monotone voice.

It's not intentional. Not at first, at least. Izuku is petty, but he's not dumb. He tries to be lowkey about it in the beginning.

That doesn't mean, though, that there's not some dark, pissed off side of him that absolutely enjoys this. And that also doesn't mean he's going to stop once he realizes he's doing it.

He isn't trying to make stabs at Aizawa or provoke him at the apartment until he watches his teacher go from confused, to annoyed, and then finally to directing the ice right back at him, and only *then* do things change for the worse. And in this case it's the best scenario he could've hoped for.

Because there's something sickeningly satisfying about having your opponent turn around and fight back after realizing that that's the only way to get anywhere. This has been a long time coming, it feels.

It all kind of snapped, he thinks, when Aizawa told him to stay away from Shinsou. That really pissed Izuku off.

He isn't proud of it, but the contest, the challenge to see who will break down and start screaming at the other again first, feels good. It feels empowering in a time when Izuku quite literally has no power.

Their mutual freeze out makes dinners awkward. Yamada rambles, and they listen to him, talk to him, but not to each other. When it's quiet and Yamada has already left the room, too frustrated to deal with their childish antics, Aizawa stares him down as if he thinks he's capable of cracking him with a single look.

Maybe a few months ago that would've worked, but not now. Not ever again.

And every time, Izuku grips his fork (he isn't even allowed a fucking set of chopsticks until he's healed) and doesn't say a word.

He's going to come out on top once this whole thing is over if it's the last thing he does, he promises that.

Ding.

Izuku checks his phone, being brought out of his thoughts, and is pleased to see that his client has texted back. It's only one message: a document containing some tips they received a while back about the

supposed drugs. Izuku can't even complain, though, as it's as much of a lead as he'll ever get the way he is now.

He can start from this page, he decides. Finding out what the hell that drug is and what it does is probably the most important thing in this entire mission besides Eri.

Depending on what he finds, if anything, Izuku will have to take his information to the hero agency that is also monitoring this. He'll have to ask the Board which one exactly it is, but he'll do it.

If they refuse to give him that information, well, he'll find it one way or another.

He's about to send a reply back when he hears Yamada call his name, announcing dinner. He stuffs his phone in his pocket with a sigh and smooths over his expression. He doesn't want to accidentally get either of his teachers too concerned with what he was doing.

And so he walks to the dining room as casually as possible and prepares for another silent war with Missy on his heels.

Izuku doesn't think he's ever been this embarrassed.

Sure, there have been a few times as Rabbit that he's been reduced to a guilty and inconsolable mess after doing something stupid, but he's never quite felt like *this* before. He's never been put on display like he is now.

Cementoss is dragging him through the hallways of the school, which is still bustling with students at the end of the day. A lot of them are still walking around for their after-school clubs.

Which means he's being seen by pretty much everyone.

Cementoss's large, concrete fingers have Izuku's ear in a tight hold, though it's not too painful, surprisingly. The only thing painful for Izuku right now is having to hear all the students laughing and giggling at him as they make their way past. But seriously, does Cementoss *have* to be dragging him like this? He could've been a little more lowkey about it, Izuku thinks saltily. Now the entire world gets

to know he's in trouble—and with none other than Cementoss, too.

The hero never usually gets angry or fed-up. He's got the patience of a saint, and he's generally laid back. That only makes this worse, as Izuku can hear all the students gossiping and speculating about what the 'weird kid' must've done to get in trouble with what must be the most chill teacher.

Okay, so, maybe Izuku is being more annoying than usual lately, but he's *not* doing it on purpose. He's not!

So what if he's trying to piss Aizawa off even more? That's not anyone else's business but theirs. And *maybe* Yamada's.

It's everyone's business if what you're doing affects them too, Number Seven points out.

Izuku smartly ignores it. What is this called? Blissful ignorance?

Yeah, that's not what this is, Number Five pipes up with a snort.

Geez, can they all shut up? He doesn't like being ganged up on like this. It's not fair.

What's not fair is you getting away with your behavior these past few days.

Izuku grins despite himself. *What, like how I got away with screwing your mom last night?*

A collective sigh is heard in his mind, and that itself is almost enough to have him bust out laughing.

The voice speaks again, voice the lowest it's ever been. *I'm going to smack you the first chance I get. Hard.*

Izuku kinda looks forward to it. Hell, he'd take being slapped over *this* any day, as now Cementoss has started lecturing him again.

"You seriously need to stop stealing things from Power Loader's supplies, Midoriya. If you actually ask him for permission, I promise he would be able to work something out for you. There's no reason to break in and steal his very expensive equipment." Cementoss gives him a look. "You do know that one of his major responsibilities is to keep check of all the things he has in stock, yes? He depends on the lists he makes to create his lesson plans and to get his job done. You

stealing his things, no matter if it looks like he's using them or not, is disruptive. And not to mention highly disrespectful and immature."

Immature? Izuku is using the equipment he *borrows* to create important things! He's trying to make more support weapons! That's, like, *the* most mature thing, right?

"This is the third time he's called me to revisit this topic with you, so I have no choice but to let Aizawa know, too."

At this, Izuku winces. He figured that's where they were headed, but hearing him say it aloud makes him queasy. "Do you have to tell him? Why can't—why can't you just tell Mic-sensei? Or—or All Might!"

"Aizawa is your homeroom teacher, Midoriya. This is a school matter, not a home matter. Here, you are his responsibility alone. He manages any disciplinary action."

Bullshit. That's so stupid.

Cementoss's pace is quick. He leads Izuku through the hallways and up the stairs without once letting go of him. Izuku's entire body is burning with humiliation by now.

God, why did Power Loader have to snitch on him in the first place? Izuku wasn't being too rude, was he? He didn't think so. Sharing is caring!

Cementoss must see the look on his face, as he shakes his head. "You should be thankful that Power Loader chose to call me the first couple times instead of going straight to the principal. He was doing you a favor. I expect you will apologize to him after this, yes?"

"Yes, sir," he says glumly, staring at the floor as they walk. "I'll return some of the supplies I took, too. I haven't used all of them yet."

"Good. You can work with Power Loader directly to figure out how you're going to make up for the things you've already discarded or used. Obviously you're not going to be expected to pay for it in money, but you'll be doing service work, I imagine."

Izuku feels like he's being dragged into court to await the judge's verdict. What will his sentence be? Cementoss already mentioned community service hours, but what else?

Hopefully ten years in prison, one of the mean voices says.

Izuku thinks about it and decides that that may as well be a life sentence, as he doesn't think he'll make it another ten years.

Soon enough, they're in front of Aizawa's classroom door. Izuku's breathing quickens on its own accord, but he doesn't have any time to try and talk Cementoss out of it again before the hero is already knocking and turning the handle.

And of course Aizawa is there. The one time Izuku doesn't want him to be. Curse his fucking luck.

He's at his desk with his reading glasses on, writing something quickly on what looks like a mission debriefing paper. He looks up when they walk in, and Izuku watches how the man's face goes from annoyed to confused and then right back to annoyed upon seeing the way Cementoss is holding his student.

"What's the issue?" Aizawa asks, skipping any pleasantries.

Bitch could've at least said hey *first.*

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Cementoss begins, pulling Izuku further into the room when the boy attempts to head back out the door, "but you know I wouldn't if it wasn't necessary."

Aizawa's eyes fall on Izuku, who forces himself not to shrink under his calculating gaze. Aizawa is sitting down, yet he's *still* so damn intimidating. Izuku doesn't know what it is, but when they're in a school setting like this, it's harder to stand up to Aizawa than it is when they're back at the apartment or somewhere else. Maybe it's because, at the back of his mind, he views Aizawa as Eraserhead here. As his sensei. And so when he gets in trouble, it feels more professional.

More deserved, even.

Izuku glares right back at Aizawa in a silent challenge despite the way his bad arm starts to prickle.

He tries to avoid confronting Aizawa most of the time, but if he can't escape now, he'll make the most of it.

"Midoriya has been stealing Power Loader's experimental paint and supplies for the past week, Aizawa. Power Loader planned to use most of it for his classes, which is really the only reason this is an issue." Cementoss releases Izuku's ear and instead lets his cinderblock hand

fall on his shoulder. “This is the third time we’ve caught him, but there’s no telling how many other times he’s done it. I’m hoping there’s a better chance he’ll listen if it’s you.”

Does he seriously think that? Izuku almost laughs.

“I thought you needed a password to access Power Loader’s storage areas?” Aizawa questions.

Cementoss nods his head. “You do. Midoriya just found a different way in.”

Exactly. You don’t need a password when you’re using the vents as a method of transportation.

Aizawa must catch on, as Izuku can clearly see the way his eye twitches when the pieces fall together. “I’m sure he did. Thanks for telling me.” He stands from his chair, and Izuku’s heart rate skyrockets. “This won’t happen again. I’ll make sure of it. I’m sorry he’s been difficult.”

Immediate anger washes over Izuku at the last words. Why is he apologizing on *Izuku’s* behalf? He’s acting like he’s Izuku’s fucking keeper or something, and he’s not! What kind of audacity does he—

“Midoriya,” Aizawa says, addressing him directly now. “You should apologize. Now.”

Apologize? It takes every last ounce of self-control Izuku has not to make a snide remark. He’s very glad when Cementoss cuts in quickly, as he doesn’t know how long he could’ve kept it up for.

“He’s already apologized to me, so there’s no need.” He grunts before clapping Izuku on the back and turning away. “He really only needs to ask next time. Power Loader doesn’t bite.”

With that, Cementoss leaves the room after giving a little farewell, and then it’s just Izuku and Aizawa. Which won’t do, of course.

Time for Izuku to go.

Izuku powers up One for All, glancing up and zeroing in on the vent hatch high above. He crouches and quickly springs into the air, only to have a gray scarf wrap around his middle and yank him down.

Great.

“Seriously, kid?” The scarf slips off of Izuku and coils back around Aizawa’s neck. His irritation is palpable. “He said this is the third time in, what, barely a week? Are you kidding me?”

Izuku huffs and pointedly turns his body away, crossing his arms. He makes to jump up again, but this time his quirk fizzles out at the same time as Aizawa’s fingers curl around his upper arm.

“Hey, I’m talking to y—”

It’s almost funny how fast Izuku twists and slaps the hand off of him. He shoves Aizawa’s touch away, blood pounding in his ears. “Touch me again and next time I’ll hide that stupid scarf in a place where not even Nezu could find it.”

Aizawa’s expression contorts into one of pure, unfiltered anger. It almost scares Izuku enough to make him backtrack, honestly. Aizawa has to take a deep breath before speaking, and when he does, his voice is carefully controlled. “Midoriya. You being upset with me does not give you the right to terrorize all the other teachers. If you have an issue, you need to talk to me about it, not steal things from staff and vandalize this building just because you feel like it.”

Any other time, Izuku would’ve jumped at the opportunity to defend himself and explain why Aizawa is wrong in his thinking, but right now he’s going down a different road. He doesn’t want to even bother with this.

“Don’t care,” he says simply.

“You’re already in trouble, kid,” Aizawa warns, a step away from being something dangerous. “Don’t dig yourself into an even deeper hole.”

“I. Don’t. Care.”

Aizawa is clearly agitated by now, but he doesn’t make another move to stop him when Izuku storms to the door. He only calls out to him, his words heated. “Fine. You can call yourself grounded here, too, then. You’re not to step a damn *foot* on the grass outside, understand me? Starting tomorrow, you’ll be staying inside with someone supervising you *twenty-four seven* until you can learn how to *behave!”*

Izuku makes sure his middle finger is unmistakable as he walks out and slams the door shut with a powered kick.

He wouldn’t want Aizawa to miss it.

Chapter End Notes

vestige action vestige action vestige action next chap !!! 🎻☆

also I love rabbit and shinsou interactions so best believe more of that will be coming soon

I like this song on yt bc it reminds me of vig izuku when he’s at his scariest

s

i saw life

Chapter Notes

> we've reached 500k words!! woah!!! my hand hurts 😫
>
> hope y'all enjoy this chap. I've had most of the scenes in it pre written since,,, I'd say chap 30?? so yeah it's safe to say I've been waiting for this one for a while 👀 also I'm so sry but I lied again LMFAO there's no vestige action this chap!! i was writing it all out and this chap got to like 20k with the vestige scenes and that's just a fcking pain so I had to split it, but I SWEAR this time it'll be the first thing next chap. it'll be out in a few days fjsfkgkgk forgive me 😭

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I have your test results."

Izuku hums, not looking at Recovery Girl even as she speaks. He swings his feet over the edge of the bed, staring at his cat socks. He lost his shoe privileges about an hour ago, as he *accidentally* managed to throw them off the roof during the storm that's still rocking the entire building and land them in a nice, large pile of mud. He had to put them in the wash, and they won't be done for a little while more at least.

He thinks it was worth it, even though it earned him a five minute long lecture from Snipe about not playing around on the roof during a storm.

It was kind of funny, Izuku contends. The only reason Snipe scolded him to begin with is because Vlad insisted *someone* had to, as neither Yamada, Aizawa, nor Yagi were available at the time.

"Why don't you do it then if you're so upset about it, Kan?" Kayama snorts.

"Because I would be fired if I handled it my way," Vlad King responds, glaring daggers at Izuku, who's standing awkwardly beside Ectoplasm and avoiding eye contact. In this room full of abnormally large people, he feels like an ant.

It's kind of embarrassing to sit here and listen to them discuss who's going to lecture him. Kinda weird, too. What kind of functioning team does that?

Still, it's probably better than all of them deciding to yell at him at once.

Kayama laughs. "C'mon, all the boy did was accidentally drop his shoes off the side."

"He threw them two hundred yards out, actually," Ectoplasm cuts in, clearing his throat. He's still wet due to having fetched Izuku's shoes for him. "We have video footage of him using his quirk to do it. Besides, he's not allowed on the roof. No students are."

Oh, shit. He really was caught in 4K quality.

At this, Kayama turns to look at Izuku. "Geez, kiddo, only two hundred yards? That's pretty low for you. Were ya not trying your best or something?"

Izuku fidgets with the muddy shoes in his hand, ashamed. "I was distracted."

"Can we focus on the important thing here? Somebody's gotta do something about this or I'm calling Nezu!" Vlad exclaims haughtily.

Across the room, Snipe gets up from his desk and sighs. "Fine. Guess I gotta do it. You know, you really are getting to be unbearable these days, Kan. Live a little."

He takes Izuku by the shoulder and leads him out of the room. They arrive fairly quickly at the laundry area on the other side of campus, where Snipe proceeds to give a long, 'straight from the UA policy handbook' talk to Izuku that even Aizawa would've been proud of.

It's so good that it probably should be life changing! But it isn't. It only makes Izuku want to do even more bad things.

"Your blood has changed again."

Izuku blinks, realizing he's still at the nurse's office. "Blood is always changing," he says automatically.

"Not like yours," she counters, and her arms are crossed. She's studying Izuku with a glint to her eyes.

He shrugs in response. "Well, two million new red blood cells are made every single second in the body, ma'am. Weird things are bound to happen."

"You may be able to get away with lying your ass off to everyone else

around you, but not with me, boy. Look at me."

Slowly, Izuku looks up. He keeps his expression smooth, and he tries to hide the way his hands are itching to scratch at his back. He's sure she notices it anyway, as she's always been keen about that sort of stuff, but she doesn't mention it this time. "Yes?"

"What happened at Hosu?"

Well, that's blunt. Izuku wishes he had some water to make his throat not as dry. "I'm not sure what you're asking."

"I've been monitoring your blood and your healing progress. Everything was going relatively fine until just recently. Why is that?"

Izuku's nails dig into his palms. "I'm not really good at science, so I don't think I can—"

"I'll make this easier for you then." Recovery Girl tilts her head, fingers drumming along her skin. "Have there been any recent developments with One for All?"

"Not really," he says, thinking of the voices bickering at the back of his mind every now and then.

"What does that mean?"

He shrugs. "It means no."

"That's not reassuring."

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you want me to say."

"You could try the truth."

Izuku takes a long, deep breath in. When he lets it out, his chest quivers a little. He figures that's bad, but he doesn't pay any mind to it. So what if his throat has been itchy and his nose has been a little runny? And so what if he's had this horrible migraine for three days now? He can't be getting sick. There's no way.

So this is probably just a fluke.

"I'm not lying," he says.

"So if I call the detective in here and he asks you the same thing, you'll tell him the same thing?"

At the mention of Tsukauchi, Izuku falters a little. He pauses, biting the inside of his bottom lip. “He’s kinda busy these days, so I don’t think that would be plausible.”

“I don’t appreciate you avoiding my question, young man.” Her words, though no-nonsense, aren’t exactly mean. Izuku knows that Recovery Girl is being a lot nicer than she could be right now.

Izuku looks down at his lap, mulling over what she’s asking. He knows how this looks to outsiders; he’s not stupid.

A week ago, his recovery after the fire incident was going relatively smoothly. He was eating more, gaining more weight, having more regular moods, and becoming overall healthier than he’s ever been. And now, after everything that’s happened during Hosu… all of that seems to be in the trash.

But not just physically, on the outermost parts of himself. No, now it’s all showing inside.

Recovery Girl did another routine blood test, and what she’s most likely seeing is the result of more quirks being added to Izuku’s body and nervous system. She’s seeing everything his blood is doing to take it all in and replicate the DNA from those quirks. Without the DNA, Izuku can’t have the functions.

But how can he tell her that? How is he supposed to explain that to her?

‘Your blood has changed again.’

Yeah, because now Izuku has around ten more parts of himself to take in and grow around. He is constantly changing, and so his blood. Taking those quirks just made everything worse, really.

Because now someone has noticed it, and it’s the worst case scenario that he could have ever imagined. This has always been one of his biggest fears: someone *knowing.*

It’s only a matter of time before she puts the pieces together and is forced to tell.

“One for All has been growing stronger,” Izuku settles on eventually, wishing the storm outside was somehow strong enough to drown out his entire being. “I feel I can do more things with it now. I can control it a little easier. But there’s…” His tongue is sandpaper. He swallows

back nothing but air and shakes his head, frustrated with himself. “There’s nothing else that’s new. Nothing important.”

“So why is your body changing so drastically in such a short amount of time? If you were anyone else, Midoriya, you would be in a grave.”

It’s amusing to Izuku that that’s not the first time he’s heard that in a week’s time. “I don’t know. But whatever it is, it has nothing to do with One for All. I promise.”

Recovery Girl studies him for a long moment. Her gaze searches him, but he doesn’t continue or go back on what he said. He just lets the silence hang heavy in the air and hopes that she’ll lay off of him.

The healer lets out a noncommittal noise. “Then what about your other quirk?”

“Boost?”

“Any developments with that?”

“Uh, no. One for All has strengthened it, of course, but if you’re talking about recent stuff, no. It’s… the same as always.”

“I bet it is.”

Izuku stares at her, heart racing as he waits to see the rest of her reaction. She rubs a hand down her face, seemingly exhausted, and Izuku hates that he’s doing this to her. Hates that he’s lying to her so openly and making her life so much more difficult than it should be. Her job is to protect and save, and by keeping his silence, Izuku is impeding on that.

“Young man, you are aware that for major injuries, I need to focus on specific parts of the body and be thinking about them in order to direct my quirk to heal those places, yes?” She barely waits for Izuku’s nod before continuing. “If you told me, honestly this time, what is causing this to happen to you, I may be able to help. I can’t promise that it will get rid of the problem, but it may make things better for you. More comfortable. I’m able to keep my mouth shut about the details if it means I can heal you to an extent. I can tell you that.”

Izuku feels something warm spread throughout his veins. Having that option there is nice, though he knows it’s unrealistic. She won’t be able to heal him. What he has… it’s an incurable disease. The only way anyone could fix the problem she’s talking about is if they call All

for One up and have him take back the quirks Izuku stole. *All* of them.

Only then would he be free from all of those heartaches.

But Izuku knows that even that is farfetched and not possible, so he has to be content the way he is.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “I appreciate it, ma’am, but it wouldn’t do anything even if I told you. As I said before, this is just who I am. My blood has been like this since I was a kid.”

Recovery Girl huffs and spins around in her chair, typing away on her computer. “Whatever, boy. Onto my other question: have you told Yagi about the damages that One for All is causing on your health?”

Izuku winces. “No, but I still don’t think it’s necessary! I already told you that One for All isn’t what’s causing this to—”

“Since you won’t tell me anything more, that’s what I’m going to assume. And All Might deserves to know that this is a possibility, so don’t make excuses. I will tell him myself if you’re having issues.”

“But he’s going to get upset if I make him think that the quirk he gave me is what’s making me have problems! He—he’ll be guilty! And he’ll worry a lot! It’s not a big deal!”

She whirls back around and points her cane at Izuku’s chest, her fiery eyes narrowed. “I’m giving you three more days to do it yourself, and then I’m dragging the both of you in here and forcing it outta you in a more old fashioned way if I must, got it? I’m not sitting here and listening to your foolish shenanigans any longer!”

Izuku isn’t even given the chance to argue, as he’s then being ushered out of the room with a cane whacking at his heels.

He guesses he’ll just have to find a way to tell Yagi the news gently, and soon.

The teachers have developed a system to help keep track of Izuku.

They all have their names in a list, even Vlad King, much to the man's own distaste, and are thus on a cycle to see who has to watch over Izuku on that given day.

It's a way to make things fair, Izuku figures, though he still thinks it's stupid. Why are the teachers creating more work for themselves? Why can't they let Izuku be alone? He's sure they have much better things to be doing.

Sure, some of them said that they really don't mind, as Izuku's pranks keep things livelier than they've been in years, but still.

His babysitter for the day is Nezu himself, which is fantastic saying as the mammal doesn't give a rat's ass (pun intended) about what he does or where he goes.

Izuku can do whatever he pleases for the time allotted where Nezu has to 'watch' him. He's not stupid, however. He knows Nezu really is watching him, just not physically.

No, the mammal is doing it in a creepy way. Through cameras. And maybe even a tracking signal coming from Izuku's phone! The boy already removed the one tracker on the inside of it, but he's unsure if there are more. He'd have to run it through a scanner. He'll make sure to do that before doing anything *too* incriminating.

The only bad thing about having Nezu watch over him is that everyone else knows the Principal isn't actually doing anything, so the stricter teachers (not naming names or anything… Vlad and Ectoplasm, surprisingly) make sure to pay extra attention to Izuku to make up for Nezu's leniency.

Which means that on Nezu days, Izuku is kept in check by nearly *everyone.*

It's extremely annoying, challenging, yet fun.

Well, for Izuku it's fun. He can't speak for some of the others. But what he can say for sure is that Chad King absolutely hates his guts by now.

The blood hero is fucking fast. Izuku never realized it before, but, hell, he'd even argue that Vlad King is faster than Aizawa in terms of reaction time. For such a big man, he doesn't hesitate or have any problems with moving around. He's quite durable, Izuku finds.

Scary, too. Really, *really* scary.

Also protective. Vlad King loves his dog, and he's very sensitive about what people say about her. Izuku made an offhand comment about how Vlad looks very similar to her, saying as he has prominent canines jutting out of his upper gums too. Izuku then asked politely if they both shared the same asshole personality, which was obviously too far.

This was made apparent when Vlad King stood up from his desk in the teacher's lounge and attempted to grab Izuku to get him to apologize publicly.

So, naturally, now Izuku is running from him. He only feels a little bit bad.

For the dog. Not for Chad.

Another arc of hardened blood attempts to catch Izuku in a cage, but the boy squeaks and ducks under it. He wills his legs to move faster and is off again like lightning, favoring his arm. It's aching, which is admittedly a lot better than being numb like it was before, but it still *hurts.*

It's so uncomfortable that Izuku has to grit his teeth to stop himself from making some embarrassing noise.

He has to bounce off the walls and corners with Boost to make sure Chad King won't be in range. He can't risk the vents, as the man could probably yank him out of them with his quirk, so he has no other choice but to keep running until Vlad either calls it quits and leaves or until Izuku can find a hiding spot.

Izuku pants, trying to think of something smart fast. The muscles in his legs start to spasm, and Izuku wants to cry. It's like the universe is trying to tell *him* to give up and just accept his fate.

His knee buckles when he rounds a corner, and as a result he goes slamming into the wall. He slides down it, eyes squeezed shut. Well, at least now his arm is numb again. That's a plus!

Izuku feels Vlad's power catching up; he'll be on him in a matter of seconds. He forces himself to his feet, powering up One for All as he does. He's sure as hell not going to lose like this. That's just pathetic!

He spots a neon green object high above, and it's like a silver lining

has just shone down from the heavens. Perfect.

Izuku uses the wall behind him as a spring to go sailing all the way up, and he twists in midair so his feet hit the ceiling right as his fingers curl around the sticky smoke bomb he planted there for emergencies a couple weeks ago.

He pushes off, heading straight for where Vlad King is skidding to a halt below him. The pro hero's mouth falls open, and Izuku notices clearly the golden specks in those dark red eyes of his.

His blood spurts out immediately, surrounding Izuku as he gets closer, but the bomb hits first.

It lands at Vlad's feet and explodes on impact, covering the room instantaneously in black smoke. It's so thick that Izuku can't even see a few feet in front of his face. He has to rely on the feeling of Vlad King's quirk in order to plant his boots on the man's chest. The hero is sent skidding back, and before he can even shout anything in response, Izuku is taking off, back in the direction they came.

The smoke won't hinder the pro hero for long, so Izuku has to fall back on the one plan he's certain won't fail him: seeking refuge with another teacher.

And there's only one other teacher close by that Izuku knows will protect him from Vlad King's assault.

It takes less than five seconds for Izuku to find his quirk. He's teaching a class right now, and Izuku hesitates because of this, but then he hears Vlad King yell his name from a hallway away, and all of his qualms vanish.

"Mic-sensei!"

Izuku's screech echoes as he slams into the door. He rights himself and throws it open, the hair on the back of his neck rising at the feeling of Vlad getting even closer.

"Sensei!" Izuku stumbles inside and nearly falls on his ass immediately. "Sensei, hide me! *Hide me!"*

Izuku spots an unoccupied desk and grabs it, throwing it in front of the door after locking it.

When he turns around, Yamada is there with a panicked expression,

and he grips Izuku's shoulders to get him to look at him. "Hey, hey, what's wrong? Listener, what's—!"

"He's gonna kill me!" Izuku says breathlessly, pulling away from him. "I've gotta hide!"

The second he spots Yamada's desk, which is on the other side of the room and facing the door, Izuku is shooting over there. He jumps over it and then ducks to hide under the overhang, eternally grateful that the front of Yamada's desk goes all the way down and thus will cover Izuku from the view of anyone coming in.

Yamada still sounds worried. "Kiddo, what is going—"

Just then, the door bursts open, causing the desk that was propped up against it to fall to the floor. Izuku's breathing ceases completely, and the room, which was filled with the confused murmurs of the third year students, goes silent. It's so quiet that Izuku swears he can hear an eyelash drop onto the ground.

Did he see me?

Number one speaks up, sounding soft and amused. *We'll find out soon enough.*

Izuku brings his knees to his chest and doesn't make a sound, praying to whoever will hear him. He doesn't want to cause a bigger scene in front of all these people by getting caught by Vlad.

"Oh," Yamada says after another few moments, and the understanding in his voice almost makes Izuku give himself away by laughing. "Well, y'all, it seems we have a visitor."

"Where did he go?" Vlad asks, coming further into the room. His words are low and deadly, as if he doesn't want the other occupants to hear him.

Yamada makes a negative sound. "Who? I haven't seen anyone come around here recently. Right, class?"

The reply is immediate and uniform. Nearly everyone speaks up, voices strong. "Yes, sensei!"

"See?" Yamada continues, as if that proves his point.

"That grin on your face says otherwise, Mic."

“Grin? I’m just happy to be teaching. Not everyone is so grumpy all the time like you, Vlad King, pal. Come on, class, let’s give him a warm welcome!” From this angle, Izuku can just about see the way Yamada raises his arms and tips his head to one side. “Actually, fun fact! Did you all know this man got an award for being the most unhappy student in his grade way back when? Super emo, amirite?”

Oh. My. God.

There are snickers around the class, and Izuku slaps a hand over his mouth to make sure none of the noises are coming from him.

“Mic,” Vlad says, but he sounds almost sheepish.

“Dunno what to tell ya! I’ve just been teaching some good ol’ English to my lovely students. I haven’t seen anything. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Yamada sticks his tongue out and turns to the board behind him, picking up a marker—a clear dismissal.

Vlad King grumbles something distasteful under his breath and storms off without another word, but not before picking up the discarded desk and placing it where Izuku stole it.

Izuku waits for his quirk to fade away into the distance, and only then does he allow himself to breathe. Great, he’s in the safe zone! He has a feeling Vlad just gave up and didn’t want to deal with him any longer, to be honest, but whatever.

Hah! His plan worked.

“You can come out,” Yamada prompts in English.

Izuku does so with a sigh of relief. He hops over the desk and bows low before his teacher, hands folded together. *“Thank you so much, Yama. I’ll leave now, I promise! Thank you for—”* Izuku chokes when a hand snags his collar, pulling him back from where he was headed for the door.

“Ah, ah, ah! Not so fast, kiddo.” Yamada clicks his tongue, voice taking on a sadistic tone. It sounds even scarier since he’s still speaking English. *“You interrupted my class time, so that means you can help with this next demonstration for everyone, yeah? Let’s get started!”*

He can’t be serious…

Fifth busts out laughing. *That's what you get for playing too damn much!*

Izuku groans. *"Yama,"* he whispers, back to the rest of the class, *"you know I hate people."*

Yamada whispers back to him. *"Well, I hate having to be interrupted, but we can't always have what we want."* He moves Izuku so he's standing in the front of the room, staring directly at the sea of curious students. His next words are a lot louder, and they're so bright and cheery that Izuku wants to melt into the floor. "Everyone, this is Midoriya Izuku from Class 1-A. Representative for all first years! Cool, right? You may have seen him on TV during the festival. He got second!"

He pats his shoulders, as if he isn't causing Izuku infinite mental damage just by doing this.

Izuku scans the room and everyone in it, craving violence now that he's been reminded that he didn't get first place.

"Midoriya, since this is an advanced English class, this is a combined group of students from both class 3-A and class 3-B. Say hello!"

Izuku doesn't say anything until Yamada gives him a little nudge, and only then does he raise a shaking hand in a meek wave. But then he remembers that his scars from Hosu are on full display, and he quickly puts his arm back down again.

He wonders who in this room would be able to kill him the fastest. The quirks here are buzzing with energy, and they're so fucking *strong*. They're all so powerful that he can feel his fingers twitching in response. Some of these quirks he recognizes, others he doesn't.

He wants them all.

"He's kind of skrunkly," someone says, which prompts everyone else to speak too.

"He's so small and cute! Oh my gosh!"

"What are you talking about? He looks like he eats food out of a trash can."

Izuku blanches, offended now. So what if he used to? It's not that big of a deal. How dramatic of them.

Before Yamada can continue on with the procedures, a girl with

periwinkle hair bounces up to him, bending down a bit to look him in the face. “Hi, Midoriya! I’m Nejire!”

Izuku blinks at her, taken aback.

Hadou Nejire. 3-A. Blood type: B. Quirk: Wave Motion.

Izuku’s eyes widen a little once her file comes into mind. She’s ranked as being in the top 3 of this school, isn’t she? She has a damn good quirk.

“That’s your first name,” Izuku says dumbly.

Hadou laughs. “Yeah! I don’t mind if you call me that!”

Izuku wracks his brain, trying to remember what the polite response to this kind of reaction is, but then even *more* people get up to greet him. Oh, God. Is this standard for these classes? Aizawa would never let his students do this to a guest. Is this even—

A boy with beady eyes and blond hair comes up on the side of Izuku, making the boy shrink back and bump into Yamada, who steps away.

“Heya!” The new boy says, and, *wow,* he’s pretty tall. He has nice hair, too. “You’re a funny looking guy, aren’t you!”

Tougata Mirio. 3-B. Blood type: O. Quirk: Permeation.

How cool would it be to see that power in action?

He wrings his hands as more people surround him. They’re all mostly big, and he can’t move to get away from them. Hadou and Tougata talk to each other as they reach over to touch Izuku.

Izuku is damn near about to bite them for crowding around so close, but then the blond pats his hair—once, twice, and then a third time before letting his hand sink further into Izuku’s curls. He scratches gently at Izuku’s scalp, and it should be weird, it should be invasive, but somehow it isn’t.

He freezes up at the feeling but then melts into it, heart thumping inside his chest. Oh, that feels *good,* what the fuck.

Izuku shivers, bones turning to mush. He falls, and Tougata doesn’t stop talking as he catches Izuku and easily supports his weight.

“Sensei, is this who’s been wandering around campus this whole

week?”

Izuku doesn’t even hear Yamada’s response; he’s too busy focusing on the feeling of the other boy patting his head like one would the family dog.

But all too soon, the students are being ushered back to their seats, and Izuku has to shake himself back to normal.

“Alright, everybody! Partner up! We’ll be working on the pluperfect tense again!” Yamada points at him. “Midoriya here will demonstrate the exercise with me.”

And so the torment continues.

Eventually, school activity starts back up as usual.

After nearly a week of talking to nobody but the teachers and the occasional third year brave enough to approach him, it’s a little uncomfortable walking (running, actually) into the hallway after doing his latest stunt and being confronted by a sea of other students.

He felt their quirks when they came in, sure, but he’s been using that sense of his so often nowadays that he’s no longer overwhelmed or bothered by the feeling of quirks or even people's emotions. He’s been getting better at controlling himself.

So feeling them and *seeing* them are two very different things for Izuku. He didn’t want to come to school today anyway, but he knew he had to. He wouldn’t be allowed to stay at the apartment by himself (for good reason, if he’s being honest).

Besides, Yamada said he’d take him to the mall this weekend, and while Izuku was at first dreading it, as he still isn’t okay with the whole *spending their hard-earned money* thing, he’s kind of excited. He’s been stuck inside, either at school or at the apartment, for so long now that he’s about ready to pull his hair out.

And so now the mall seems like a great idea. He doesn’t want to ruin that opportunity by making Yamada disappointed in him. He’s going

to try and be on his best behavior… around Yamada.

Everyone else is fair game.

Izuku now waits at the top of the vents, searching the crowd with nothing but his senses. He has his back against the vent wall, and he can't see the students down below, but he can feel them.

His mind makes a little *pinging* noise whenever he finds who he's looking for, and he checks the names off mentally.

But then, right at the time Izuku predicted, the boy he's really looking for walks through the gates. He tracks the feeling of his quirk as he makes his way through the courtyard and into the building, and only then does Izuku move.

He opens his eyes and then the vent hatch, getting his newest invention ready. He props the large gun up on his shoulder and aims it, making sure to keep himself steady. He wouldn't want to hit the wrong student.

When *Explosion* passes right underneath Izuku, allowing him a glimpse of familiar blond hair, the release latch is yanked back.

And nothing happens. There's not even a kickback.

Izuku immediately feels like a dumbass for having his gun fail on him like that, as he spent three whole days perfecting it and now has to spend some more time fixing it.

He moves it around and looks into the wide barrel, wondering how the fuck he managed to mess this all up—which is probably the dumbest decision he's made this morning. Everyone knows that pointing any type of gun at your face, whether deadly or not, is a no-no.

The first time he did that around his father, All for One used one of his many quirks to pull the trigger while it was still pointed at Izuku.

Granted, it was only a dart gun that contained poison that doesn't actually affect Izuku due to his metabolism, so it's not like it posed a huge threat, but the point remains. Izuku is sure All for One would've done it even if it did have a real bullet in it.

So, really, Izuku should've learned.

True to his luck, a similar thing happens this time. There's a *whump,* followed by a click, which Izuku has come to know as the sound the gun makes when the spring is released.

Well.

He doesn't have enough time to move out of the way before the silver, shimmering net is being ejected out of the barrel. It spreads out and envelopes Izuku immediately. The magnets *buzz* on and snap together with their closest partners, enclosing Izuku in a tight ball. Because it was so close to him when it fired, the force of the blast causes Izuku to hit the wall hard and slide sideways, right toward the open vent hatch.

And because the net itself is lined with quirk suppressant probes (he stole the blueprints from Nezu) and has a near untearable transparent barrier, Izuku isn't able to grab onto anything to stop himself.

He drops like a rock from around thirty feet up, shrieking an incoherent mixture of *oh, shit, oh, shit, I'm fucked!*

He hears some of the other students scream too, but it's not like they can do anything. He's falling pretty fast, and even if they could catch him, it would be pretty awkward to get a good hold of him since the barrier is sleek. They'd have to grab the rope that's attached to the net itself and somehow be able to—

Izuku hits the ground hard. He manages to twist just in time so his good side takes the brunt of the impact, but it still sends his whole body into a shock. The breath is knocked out of him, and for a good ten seconds he's reduced to a still corpse on the floor, his lips parted but otherwise not moving as he tries to suck in some air.

Stars appear in the corners of his vision, and he swears some of them are dancing together. One of the pairs is definitely doing the *bachata.* He's sure of it.

"Is he okay?"

"What just happened?"

"Did he fall from the ceiling? And is that a *rodent* trap?"

"Someone call a teacher!"

Izuku curls into a fetal position, his muscles spasming again as he tries

to force One for All to come to him despite knowing it's impossible to actually use it inside the bubble. Curse his past self for being so smart.

He shakes his head, and the world swims as he wheezes out a response. "Nuh. Nuh, 'm fine. *Don* do that. 'S all *good."*

The people don't seem convinced, and they shouldn't be, really. He did just fall from like three stories, which could've paralyzed an average child. How are they supposed to know that Izuku is built differently? It's not their fault.

But then a familiar rough voice speaks above the growing sound of concern and disbelief. "Oi! Get away from him!" Kacchan pushes his way through the throng, and Izuku wants to kick himself for forgetting how lovely his best friend looks.

Every time he sees him he just gets so flustered, as he never remembers how—

"What the hell is this, Shitku?" Kacchan presses on the net, only to pull back immediately as if the touch burned him. "Did ya make this yourself? It'd be cool if you weren't so stupid." He grabs for the gun and the rope, beginning to tighten the slack using the lever on the side of the weapon. "Huh, staying silent now, idiot?"

Kacchan scoffs at Izuku's lack of reply and just drags him through the hallway, towards a more secluded spot.

Izuku, who is still trying to drag in more breaths to speak again, can't do anything but let it happen. Some of the witnesses try to stop Kacchan and tell him to take Izuku to the nurse, but the blond takes one look at his friend's frantic head shakes and tells them to fuck right off.

How chivalrous.

"There's a closet in the hall to the right," Izuku wheezes the moment he can. "That'll be good."

Kacchan opens the door and quite literally throws Izuku inside upon hearing this. It's a bit of a tight spot, but at least this way they won't be stared at when they talk.

"You've gotta press the button on the bottom left side. It'll turn off the quirk suppressors, and then I can detach the magnets."

“What were you even trying to do with this?”

“Catch you and then reel you up into the vents.”

Kacchan stares at him. Izuku stares back. “What?” Kacchan asks, baffled.

Izuku doesn’t answer. He just blinks.

“You know, now that you said that shit, I’m not setting you free.”

“Come on, I was only gonna test it out on you because I knew you’d be able to handle it!”

Kacchan’s face splits into a leery grin. “Yeah, and I’d handle it better than you are.”

“To be fair, I did fall from the ceiling, so—” Izuku cuts himself off with a yelp when the net suddenly splits apart and zips back into the barrel of the gun.

He stays on the floor for a moment, giddy. He knew it would at least retract correctly. It’s reusable for sure! It’ll be great for practical use. He wonders if it’ll work on All Might. The man is pretty big, so even if Izuku manages to capture him entirely in the net, he could probably break the quirk suppressant probes by overwhelming them with his sheer strength. It would be interesting to see.

Kacchan yanks Izuku up by the shirt, pulling him so his face is mere inches away from his. Izuku’s toes are barely touching the ground. “You look sick,” Kacchan says, accusatory.

Izuku huffs. “Why does everyone keep saying that? I’m completely fine! And nice to see you, too, I guess. It’s been, what, over a week since we last saw each other in person? You could at least act like you missed me or something. I’ll only be accepting a *Romeo and Juliet* type performance, thanks.”

“I’ve been seeing your dumbass all over the news lately,” Kacchan hisses without skipping a beat. “So, trust me, I didn’t miss you at all.”

“You’ve always had such a way with words, babe.”

Kacchan releases his grip, and Izuku’s knees buckle. He would’ve fallen back to the floor had Kacchan not pushed him against the wall in the next second. “I read all the reports, you know.” His words this

time are much quieter. “I have a hard time believing our rat of a principal is going to turn a blind eye to everything that’s happened. What are they going to do to you?”

Izuku glances away, the tips of his ears turning red. He doesn’t want to repeat the words he overheard that day, so he doesn’t. He settles on what the truth is right this moment. “Nothing.”

“Really?” Kacchan pulls back. “I don’t believe that.”

Izuku rubs his sore arm then, and he doesn’t miss the way Kacchan’s eyes follow the action. “Well, they, uh—*Aizawa,* I mean, took Rabbit away. And I don’t know if I’ll get it back from him anytime soon. But, aside from that… They said they're going to take things one day at a time. If I step out of line again like that, I think that’s when they’ll turn me over or something.”

Kacchan’s red gaze is intense. “You really think they would do it? Turn you in?”

“Detective Tsukauchi would,” Izuku says, focusing on a dark spot on Kacchan’s nose. “If he thinks it will keep people safe, I know he will.”

At this, Kacchan lets out a quick breath and turns around, running his hand through his hair. “Geez, Shitku. What even happened back there? You didn’t tell me shit over text.”

The lump returns in Izuku’s throat. He blinks and sees gleaming white talons, a doll without a head, and glassy, familiar eyes. He shudders and looks at the floor. “I didn’t think you’d appreciate it over the phone.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. But you’ll tell me now?”

Izuku wordlessly points to the small, blinking red dot in the corner of the room. It’s new; it wasn’t there a few days ago. It’s obvious why it was installed, though.

Kacchan sees the camera too and sets his jaw as he begins to pop the bones in his neck. “Guess you’ll have to come to the house later.”

Izuku winces. “Yeah, that’s not happening. I’m, uh, kinda on house arrest right now.”

“House arrest?” Kacchan’s face quickly contorts into one of joy. “You mean you got *grounded?”*

“Don’t say it like that! That’s not what it—”

“You got fucking grounded!” The boy laughs, and it’s sharp and grating. “Hah! Figured there was something else to this!”

“Kacchan!”

“This just made my week, nerd. I’m gonna tell the hag that you—”

Izuku throws himself at him, fingers grabbing for Kacchan’s spiky blond hair. They grapple with each other for a bit, but Kacchan is ultimately stronger. He twists and throws Izuku right over his hip with surprising ease. When Izuku’s back hits the ground, Kacchan is on him immediately. He hovers above him with his knees on either side of Izuku’s legs, and he grabs both of Izuku’s wrists when the boy attempts to shove him off.

Boost burns at Izuku’s muscles, and he’s about to break the grip his friend has on him when Kacchan points his free hand at his face, palm sparking in warning. Izuku’s attempts to get him off of him cease, and he concedes with a roll of his eyes.

“You’re even weaker than you already were,” Kacchan says, but it’s not mean. It’s in a more observational tone. “What happened to you?”

Izuku’s irritation flares up again. “I said I’m *fine.”* He hikes his knees up to his chest, bringing his legs out from under Kacchan, and wraps his thighs around his friend’s neck. Kacchan instinctively releases Izuku’s wrists, and that’s all it takes to give Izuku the upper hand. He puts one hand on the ground and the other on the side of Kacchan’s head. In one quick move, Izuku flips them so he’s now on top.

“See? I’m still better at—” Izuku’s voice dies out. His mind comes to a halt when Extract warns him of the approaching person. He ignores Kacchan’s annoyed reply and attempts to scramble off him, but it’s too late.

The door is wrenched open, and the poor janitor that Izuku has talked to in passing a few times this week only stares at them, looking entirely unsurprised. Izuku doubts this is the first time this has happened to him.

For five long, agonizing seconds, neither party speaks. Izuku internally curses his luck, as this is like the third time someone has walked in on him doing something that’s technically not disallowed but is definitely suspicious at first glance.

Kacchan sits up, pushing Izuku off. “This is—”

The door shuts, and the janitor is gone. The bell rings soon after, signaling that first period is going to start soon.

Izuku can only hope the janitor won’t mention this to anyone. It wouldn’t do any good.

They sit in silence for all of ten seconds, and Kacchan is the one who breaks it again, his voice matter-of-fact. “I’m going to kill you.”

Izuku only sighs. “Yeah.”

They’re not late to first period, but it’s a close thing. Izuku ignores Aizawa’s stare when he and Kacchan walk in together, not wanting to deal with another fiasco today.

Time goes by faster than Izuku thought it would. He listens to his classmates talk about Hosu and all of the media coverage of it while sketching in his notebook. He tries not to let it bother him, the things they’re saying, but it does.

At noon, he gets to listen to the entire lunchroom gossiping, too. Most of them talk about how horrible the destruction and the scope of the damage was, and how terrible it was that lives were lost. Someone mentions Native, and Izuku’s lunch goes downhill from there.

The one thing that makes him the most bitter, though, is the fact that a few students across the room are having a debate on Stain. Some of them are obviously uneducated on who exactly the Hero Killer is and what he’s done, as they’re mentioning how the heroes should’ve given Stain a chance to speak his mind and to make a formal statement about his opinions and stances. They say that maybe it was the heroes’ fault that Stain did what he did, and that things could’ve been solved if only they didn’t immediately try to attack Stain.

Most of the other students shoot those thoughts down, but that’s not the point. The point is that *some* of the students feel this. *Some of them* actually feel this way.

They actually think that Stain could have possibly been, in their

words, an *underground hero.* As if the Hero Killer and someone like, say, Eraserhead, are even close to being the same. As if they stand for the same ideals.

Izuku has to press his hands over his ears and zone out deeply in order to not react the way he would've in any other situation. They're stupid, he thinks. Fucking stupid. But they just don't know. They weren't there. They don't know Stain. Don't know the things he did that made even Izuku, fresh out of the grasp of his father's stained hands, flinch away.

They don't know how many times Stain has looked a sobbing hero—a parent, a sibling, a friend, a savior for many—in the face and merely scoffed at their patheticness before letting the blade plunge down.

They don't know that sometimes Stain stayed and watched as his victims twitched and drowned in their own blood just to make sure they didn't have a chance at making it.

Not many ever got to see that soulless glint to Stain's white eyes like Izuku and his victims did.

The other students don't know. And in a way, Izuku is glad, but he's also *angry.* Some dark part of him wants them to have felt it, to have seen it, to have been there, if only to get them to shut the fuck up.

They call what happened to Iida Tensei *mercy.* A second chance. As if Stain allowed the hero to live out of the 'kindness' of his own heart.

It makes Izuku sick.

Why do they never talk about the Nomu? Why is it always Stain, Stain, Stain, as if the Nomu aren't just as important? Even more so? Why do they not *see it!*

When he glances up, he sees Iida across from him staring down at his food, brows furrowed and lips pursed. His eyes are watery.

Todoroki is nowhere to be seen. Izuku vaguely remembers feeling him walk out of the cafeteria and head for the bathroom, but he's not sure.

He might just do the same.

But then a soft touch brings him back to himself. He turns, and Uraraka has something pained on her face. "Are you okay, Deku?" It's

the way she says it that tells Izuku she isn't meaning just him. She's talking about their other two as well.

Izuku sees Iida look at him, too, not saying a word, and he forces himself to give Uraraka a smile. "Yeah. Things will be a lot better than they were! I'm sure of it."

Uraraka softens, and the way her eyes light up makes Izuku think that if she can believe it, his words might have a chance at being true.

Midoriya is so obviously avoiding him.

When the kid's not trying to piss Shouta off, he takes to simply acting like he doesn't exist. The hero can't tell which is worse: having to deal with the twenty-seven pranks a day that he always ends up getting in trouble for with his boss, or having to deal with the complete and utter silence that stretches on in the instances where Midoriya and Shouta are alone together.

It's unsettling. It's awkward, and Shouta hates it. Hates it because it's never like that when Hizashi is around. It's never awkward or quiet or tense. That's just not possible with his husband.

Shouta isn't jealous, however. He could never be.

It's all just so frustrating. He knows, of course, that what Midoriya is doing is to be expected. With everything he's gone through, these types of reactions coming from an overwhelmed teenager isn't rare. In fact, it's nearly standard.

Does that make Midoriya's actions acceptable? No. But they're *expected.*

Shouta is having the most trouble figuring out how to respond and react to these events. It's easy to get angry, and it's easy to just dole out the punishments without any further thinking, but for this he can't do any of that. He has to be patient. He has to find that balance between hero, teacher, and sort-of guardian.

There's gotta be an overlap somewhere, he's sure.

What makes matters even more frustrating is that Hizashi was born for situations like this, it seems. He's good with Midoriya in a way that Shouta knows he himself will never be. He's kind and funny and loud and he somehow manages to hit all of the right buttons when it comes to him. He knows how to make Midoriya smile, he knows how to make him laugh—for real, not one of those fake chuckles the boy gives sometimes, and he knows how to get him out of one of his moods.

Something that Shouta hasn't been successful in doing since, well, ever.

Hizashi is the type of person that everyone would want as a partner, and he's also the perfect teacher. Shouta has only been reminded of this ever since Midoriya started staying over.

He is so, *so* glad that he's with this man. He's also glad that Hizashi is still here, right beside him, helping him with the struggles that Shouta has thrown his way. Without him, Shouta doesn't know how he would be keeping it together right now.

Teaching students is hard. Teaching teenagers is another thing.

But that's something you can learn to do through trial and error. Raising a kid—er, housing a vigilante, is different. It's much harder. You can't just fly by the seat of your pants and hope everything works out.

You have to be solid. You have to be that steady figure. And Shouta is not that figure. At least, he doesn't think so.

And yet, with how hard it is, Hizashi makes it seem so easy.

Admittedly, he's been relying on Hizashi to do all the emotional things thus far. He saw how the two of them clicked with each other, so Shouta never thought he should bother with growing that sort of bond with the kid. To him, it wasn't necessary nor wanted. He didn't think Midoriya would appreciate it, as he's never indicated that he wanted to have that kind of thing.

Shouta mistakenly thought that Hizashi's care alone would be enough, and now he's paying for it.

Or maybe, if he's being completely truthful, that's not exactly what it was. Maybe Shouta did think that Midoriya needed something more. Maybe he did think that the boy silently craved some kind of

validation from him. Maybe the thought crossed his mind sometimes during those patrols together that Midoriya was actually missing *something.* Something vital. Something he didn't want but definitely should have. Something he should've had from the very beginning.

Midoriya avoided him at the start, back when they were still 'playing cops-n-robbers,' as the vigilante liked to say. He fought tooth and nail to get away from Shouta, and everything about him screamed the tale of a wounded animal desperately trying to heal itself.

But eventually, gradually, *slowly,* that changed. When Shouta opened up and showed that blatant, almost foolish trust first by presenting his back to him on multiple occasions and talking about a little bit of his life outside of work, Midoriya did the same.

He opened up too.

Those times seem like so long ago that Shouta has already forgotten it all, hasn't he? He's grown too… entitled, maybe. He forgot how much the both of them had to work to get to where they are. Er, *were,* now.

In order to repair the damage done, Shouta needs to start over. He needs to take that first step, just like he did back then.

He needs to open up. Explain himself. Something like that.

It sounds easy. God, it should be, shouldn't it? It sounds like the most simple thing in the world. And yet Shouta just… can't. His hands tremble whenever he thinks of sharing those dark thoughts of his, those thoughts that'll fully explain why he said what he did to Midoriya at the hospital.

Shouta knows he can't make excuses for himself, but he also knows that he's still *right.* Somewhat.

Rabbit told him one night that he never wore the mask solely to conceal his identity. He said to Shouta that he wanted to make sure the villains could never see his fear. He wanted to ensure that civilians would never have to doubt if he was capable of doing something.

But Shouta doesn't think that's all there is to it. Truthfully, Midoriya has never been terrified when faced with death. Not in Shouta's eyes.

Every single time he's come close to dying, every time he's only just barely skirted the edge during patrol—Shouta would look at his face. And he would never see fear.

Only something like disappointment. Annoyance. A bit of sadness. And shock, of course.

But never has he seen Midoriya terrified at the prospect of dying. He's only ever looked scared when it was someone else's life on the line.

And thinking about that makes Shouta feel like such a goddamn failure.

He doesn't know how to approach these topics with Midoriya. Every time he tries, the words always fail. They shrivel up before they can even leave his mouth.

It doesn't help that he's been busy with around twenty different missions right now. His mind is everywhere at once, and he can't sleep. He can't keep track of the things he would normally keep a detailed record of.

And he's just… he's been feeling weird. Off. Like it has something to do with the air. Like the Earth is spinning in a different direction, but only for him.

He gets bouts of nausea at random times during the day. He loses his balance. He zones out in the middle of lecture, hand still holding a marker and pressing it against the board.

He hasn't felt like this since he graduated and had to sleep out on the streets for weeks.

He's out of his league, here, he's sure. Jesus, he needs to ask someone for guidance if he doesn't want to fuck this up even worse. He doesn't like asking for help, but he figures this is different, as it's not just about him. It's hurting others. It's hurting Midoriya.

And so Shouta, with hands that still won't fucking stop trembling and eyes that won't quit burning even with his gel drops, grabs for his phone and searches for Inui's contact.

They never usually text each other, but that's mostly because Inui has trouble messaging anyone over the phone due to his large, furry hands. He prefers calls.

The last text Inui ever sent to Shouta was from quite a few years ago, back when Shouta was still adjusting to teacher life.

'I'm a psychologist for patients of all ages, not just children. That being

said, while my office cannot ethically be open for staff due to the problem of us being coworkers, I can still lend an ear to a friend outside of work if needed.'

Shouta never answered him, and he feels bad for it now. Hopefully Inui doesn't hold a grudge for that.

Forcing himself not to hesitate or overthink, Shouta types out the text and sends it.

Almost immediately, the message is read; Shouta sees the receipt right under it.

His phone vibrates with Inui's caller ID lighting up the room, and Shouta takes a quick breath before sitting up on the couch.

This is the first step in order for Shouta to change things. He's going to try his very hardest to learn how to be better.

He swipes right on the phone icon, and when he brings the speaker up to his ear, he somehow feels lighter than he's ever been.

Chapter End Notes

> "blood on your hands, they say. as though it stops there at your wrist like a glove. as though you could do *this,* and there could be any part of you that wasn't stained and dripping."
>
> i feel izuku listened to this song on yt back when he had never met aizawa and just laid out on some rooftops after patrol, thinking about everything he's done and has yet to do
>
> also I feel like the only reason mirio knew that scratching izuku's head would work to calm him down is because he does the same thing for suneater when he's anxious
>
> i

eight golden urns

Chapter Notes

> we just recently hit 600k hits!! I'm so floored rn y'all I can barely believe it 😭 tysm for the support and the encouragement!! i love y'all a lot!
>
> cw: manga spoilers for some of the vestiges/past users of One for All, including their looks, names, abilities, some of their background, etc. it is not anything TOO important (it has nothing to do with current manga happenings), but if you wish to not be spoiled of their names or quirks (as I know the suspense in the anime rn is exciting regarding Izuku's possible future quirks) I recommend reading the manga first :) in the future, however, there will be major manga spoilers, so be aware.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku has mastered the art of dying in his mind.

If he were to count off the amount of times he's kicked the bucket during his dreams, he'd need more hands. Some of the ways he dies are, admittedly, kind of funny. Pathetic, though.

Sometimes he gets stuck in what feels like black quicksand, and he just slowly suffocates down there beneath the floor. Sometimes lightning strikes and kills him immediately! Shit, just last night he had an anvil drop on him from above.

How the hell an anvil made it into the void plane is beyond him, but he isn't about to go analyzing the meanings behind how he dies. He isn't a sleep or dream expert. Besides, he doesn't actually think these things matter.

It's just a skill issue, to be quite honest.

The thing is, he's been trying every single time he so much as closes his eyes to go inside this realm and make it through the pool of stars. He needs to see the other side. He craves it. He can't live without knowing what's beyond his own understanding.

Each time he tries, though, he either doesn't make it to the pool at all, or he drowns when he gets there.

While some of his deaths are, as he said, funny, a lot of them… aren't.

Sometimes the creatures catch him. And most aren't forgiving.

He dies by fire most nights. There's a new monster in the realm. It has big, flaming red wings that burn up Izuku's hair if he gets even ten feet from it. That's the one who manages to get him most of the time.

The others, though, are just as bad. They grab him and make sure he wakes up in a cold sweat after being killed using one of their own methods. Sometimes he's thrown straight through the ground and back into reality.

Other times he's not so lucky. Some of the more aggressive ones simply tear him apart whilst easily keeping back the few creatures that attempt to defend Izuku.

He hates those nights the most, because he can feel it all.

Everything changes when he manages to get to the pool again after a few days of straight failure. He doesn't hesitate before diving in, knowing that if he does so this time, one of the creatures will grab him and drag him away.

The stars set into his skin as he swims. They burn like liquid nitrogen, and it makes him weirdly cold all over. He's holding his breath and trying not to waste a second of his time. He doesn't feel like drowning again.

The deeper he goes, the harder it is to keep going. He can't see, as it's darker than night, so he's basing his direction on feeling alone. The pressure makes his ears pop painfully, but he spurs on. The heavy wings on his back aren't helping one bit, either.

Come on, One for All.

The red lightning sparks to life. It wreaths around Izuku, circling him and illuminating his surroundings. This way, he can see the rainbow koi fish swimming and dancing around. They're lively, and it looks like they're doing some kind of dance. They're so fast, too. Abnormally so.

They spin around Izuku, crowding around his light, and the boy can't help but smile. He lets his palm glide over their scales as he moves. They really are beautiful.

One for All lights his path, but it doesn't seem to make anything easier. His vision start to darken, and his lungs are about to burst.

Just a little more. He swears it! He can *feel* it. There's something there, and he doesn't want to miss it. He can't. This is the closest he's ever gotten before.

Something grabs his ankle, and he kicks it off with his other foot. *Not like this,* he thinks. *Give me a damn break!*

As his movements start to slow, he wonders if maybe there really is nothing on the other side of the pool. Maybe it's just an infinite sea of black. He could just be killing himself over and over for zero gain. It wouldn't be the first time.

His mouth opens without his permission, instinctively trying to draw in a breath. The liquid rushes into him, and he chokes, spasming. *Fuck* this place!

He bets the creatures are laughing at him for trying to escape the inevitable. He bets they're just waiting for him to come back next time so they can rub this in his face. He bets they're just going to fucking—

His hand breaks the surface. A rush goes through him, and it's like someone yanks him up, dragging him right out of the sludge-like water. His knees hit soft ground, and then he's falling over onto his side, soaking wet and trembling. He throws up the river of black until he's dry heaving, his heart thumping outside his chest.

When he opens his eyes, he sees the Moonpool swirling around just a foot away, almost as if it's alive. Even as he registers this, he can feel his body drying off immediately, the water sliding off of him and returning to the pool. It's then that he realizes his wings have shimmered away, leaving his back bare.

He forces himself to sit up on his elbows, and the first thing he thinks is *finally.*

A giggle bubbles up inside of him, and he clutches his stomach when he erupts in joyous laughter. He was right, of course. There is something on this side. He wasn't dumb. He was doing something right. He's not stupid.

He gets to his feet, wondering what he's going to do now. Backing up, Izuku stares above him, noticing the pink and blue galaxies and nebulae. It's like he's been dropped in the middle of the universe, and

he gets to see the formation of every new star.

It's exhilarating. It fills his veins with something new.

Izuku takes another step back, awed, and bumps into something cold. He's not scared, though. He doesn't scream. In this area, for some reason, he feels… neutral. Past the shock and happiness and curiosity, Izuku is… just Izuku.

Nothing about this feels different to him. It's weird to think about. It's like he's always been here, just not physically.

When he looks over his shoulder, unfazed, he only blinks when he sees himself staring back.

It's not actually him, though. He doesn't think so, at least. Standing before him is a wispy, cloud-like figure that's the same height and build as him. The smoke is black and green, and if he looks closely enough, he can see bright strands of red warring within.

White light spills out of the area where the eyes are, and Izuku finds himself unable to look away. Besides the ethereal wings made of clouds fanning out behind it, there are no other distinguishable features on the figure, but Izuku just *knows* that this is supposed to be himself.

Some fucked up version, maybe. But it's Izuku.

You look like Kuro, he thinks, but the words echo around him from all sides as if he said it aloud.

He reaches forward tentatively, and his fingers go through the smoke until he touches the soft body underneath. That's what he must've bumped into. The smoke is doing nothing but covering his other self.

Izuku circles the figure, and it— *he* tilts his head to follow his movements. He wonders absentmindedly how intelligent he is. He can obviously hear, see, and be aware of his surroundings, but can he think? Can he… speak?

Just as Izuku's about to ask this weird version of himself something, Not Izuku turns and walks away, deeper into the realm. His steps don't make any sound, but he leaves a quickly dissipating trail of black in his wake.

Where is he going? Is there something else here that Izuku might want

to see? Maybe Not Izuku is just wandering aimlessly. There isn't a way to know for sure unless Izuku is willing to follow.

Despite his curiosity, Izuku goes in the opposite direction, eyeing how the sky sort of distorts and folds in on itself far into the distance. It's like he's in a large bubble of some kind, and the pool dropped him near the entrance to it. He can explore this area later—for now, he wants to get a layout of everything else.

Soon, Izuku comes upon an arch. The brightly colored galaxies and asteroid clouds come to a halt here, and beyond the horizon is nothing but darkness. It's almost like an optical illusion.

When he steps through, he half expects to immediately be incinerated. Fortunately, though, he lives for another night.

The air is chillier here. It sends goosebumps up Izuku's arms and makes him nervous. He doesn't exactly feel as safe in here as he did the other place. Nothing is nearly as welcome here.

He walks and walks for what seems like hours but could only be about two minutes if he actually counted in his mind. Eventually, Izuku sees something other than black in the distance.

He sees gold.

And it's a terrifying thing, because he knows what kind of golden yellow that is. He sees the tall frame, the thinness of the body, and pauses in his tracks.

He thinks he knows who this is, but he isn't sure until he breaks off into a run and faces the man fully.

Yagi Toshinori's white eyes are wide, as if actually surprised at seeing Izuku here. He moves first, grabbing Izuku's wrist, and the boy stiffens.

"Hey," Izuku says, but his voice is shaky. "All Might?"

Despite the weirdness of the situation, he doesn't pull away. He's a little freaked out, but then the man moves his wispy hand so that he's carefully holding Izuku's. His touch is cool at first, but then it tingles. His golden cloud of smoke is like the holiest of fires, and Izuku feels the warmth of it on his face and the rest of his body.

Yagi examines the hand, and when he looks at Izuku, he seems almost

sad.

Izuku frowns too. “Hey,” he says again, trying to get his teacher to answer him. Not Izuku didn’t speak, so he doubts Yagi can, but he still wants to try.

The hand retracts, though, and instead All Might moves to rest it on Izuku’s head for just a few seconds.

It’s familiar, and yet it feels wrong all the same. It’s like the touch is *there* but not. The air between them is electrified, and Izuku wonders if All Might—the real one—has ever had dreams or sensations like this.

He senses One for All inside Yagi. It’s all around him, actually. Like it’s permeated into the realm itself.

I wonder. Is this…

“Pretty weird, ain’t it, kid?”

This time, Izuku screams. He whips around, coming face to face with a stocky, middle-aged man with a square chin. He has his hands on his hips with a sort of smug grin on his face. Bright yellow goggles sit at the top of his shiny head, and it reminds Izuku of someone else.

Izuku instinctively searches for a quirk, but he can’t feel one, as One for All is smothering any other possible ones.

He backs away, not liking how the man could sneak up on him like that. Not liking how the sheer *power* in this man’s stance puts even All Might’s to shame.

Izuku’s tremors start back up, and he can’t even form a reply as he tries to put as much distance between them as possible without showing his back.

The man snorts at the sight. “Where d’ya think you’re going? You don’t even know where you are!”

Izuku swallows, eyes darting around. He was planning to go back to the Moonpool, but his sense of direction is fucked. He isn’t sure where that area is now.

“You—you don’t look like him,” Izuku says, looking from Yagi to the mystery man and back again. “You’re—”

“Whole? Solid? Yeah, that might be ‘cause I’m actually dead.”

That part was obvious, but somehow it still sends a jolt through Izuku. He stares with doe eyes, his backward steps gradually getting larger.

The newcomer doesn’t miss this; he’s obviously keen, Izuku notes. The man crosses his arms, his entire stance screaming *relaxed.* “You best quit that. There is no exit outta here that you’ll be able to find. I ain’t gonna hurt you, anyway.”

Izuku freezes despite himself. “People have—they’ve—they’ve said that to me before. And they’ve always lied.”

Light gray smoke rises a foot from the ground some ten yards away, and then another voice is speaking up. “We know,” a shorter man with black hair begins, erupting from the smoke. His words are smooth like honey. “We saw it all.”

What the fuck does that mean? Who are you guys?

Izuku quickly moves away as the black-haired man advances toward him. He has a collared shirt on that looks like Best Jeanist’s hero costume, but just a little more fashionable. His eyes are narrowed and sharp like flint, but they’re not mean. Far from it.

It still makes Izuku want to throw up.

“You really don’t know who we are yet?” The first guy asks, sounding almost impatient. “Come on, didn’t our voices clue ya in? Use your brain, now. We haven’t spent all this time living inside ya for you to not even know us. Don’t embarrass yourself.”

Izuku doesn’t have the courage to defend himself. He just clutches his shaking hands to his chest, trying to calm his breathing. This is getting really fucked up.

Another new voice sounds right near Izuku’s ear, startling him. “No need to belittle him. He’s overwhelmed, Banjou.”

When Izuku looks, there’s no one there beside him. He spins around, about to combust, only to realize that the person belonging to the voice is actually on the opposite side of him. Izuku is now surrounded —entrapped in a triangle.

The newest addition to his LSD Trip is a big, muscular man with stark white hair that falls down to broad shoulders. He has large, jagged

scars stemming from the top of his forehead down to his chin, but that's not the most noticeable thing about him, no.

He doesn't have any eyebrows. It's like they've been burnt off.

Izuku must've accidentally taken too much of his medication, huh? Yeah, that's gotta be it.

"I would be frightened as well if I went to sleep and woke up here," White Hair continues. He's looking down at Izuku with a thoughtful expression.

It's sickening.

"Everyone is scared once they see you, Shinomori," the man called Banjou says with a roll of his eyes. "But anyway. It's about damn time the kid here paid us a visit. It's been long overdue."

Discount Jeanist lifts up a shoulder. "I don't think so. He could have lived to wait a little longer. Just look at him."

Banjou laughs heartily. "He does look pretty small, doesn't he? He's a real pipsqueak. I wonder what this guy was thinking when he chose him. I certainly wouldn't have; not at first glance, I mean. Guess that only means he's got an eye for the future, eh?" At this, he moves toward Yagi, hand raised as if to give him a slap on the back.

And Izuku doesn't know why this does it for him, doesn't know why this sparks him into action and opens up the chasm of protectiveness inside him, but it does.

He doesn't register the words, doesn't take a second to realize what they could mean. He just moves.

One second, Izuku is standing in the middle of all three of them, and in the next, he's in front of Yagi's misty body, fist shooting forward. The superpowered punch hits Banjou right in the chest, and time slows. Izuku's red lightning zips in the air all around them, lighting up the entire plane and sending shockwaves in every direction.

Banjou is sent into the distance, but with the help of a few wild tendrils spilling from his hands and digging into the ground, he rights himself in time so he lands neatly on his feet.

It doesn't matter, though, as Izuku is already in a defensive stance, fists up and burning from the contact. "Don't *touch* him," Izuku hisses,

making sure Yagi is still behind him.

With Yagi in this state, Izuku doesn't know how much of what happens in this realm will affect him in real life.

Yagi may not be able to defend himself against these people. It wouldn't be fair. He doesn't deserve to have—

A deep, guttural laugh brings Izuku back. Banjou is doubled over and clutching his stomach, real tears springing from his eyes. Izuku hopes it's from the pain of the punch but somehow knows it isn't.

"What—what's so funny?" Izuku asks loudly, voice cracking painfully in the beginning. When Banjou glances up at him and begins to walk back toward his spot, still laughing, Izuku tenses up. He saw how he managed to land on his feet before, and while those tendrils looked wicked, he doesn't want to be on the receiving end of their assault. "Hey! *Stay there!"*

Banjou does stop, but not out of fear or any emotion that Izuku would have preferred. No, he looks amused. The man looks at Discount Jeanist and the guy he called Shinomori. "Well, ain't this cute? He hit me! The damn kid socked me!"

Shinomori blinks. "He did. But didn't you deserve it?"

"You have no reason to fight," the black-haired man says, staring directly at Izuku and paying no mind to the other two. He has his hands stuffed in his pockets. "Your sensei can't be hurt here. Neither can you. Forgive us; this isn't exactly how we thought we'd finally see you. We're unprepared."

Izuku shakes his head fervently, not impressed. He makes sure to still keep his eye on the others, who are bickering with each other now. "I don't care. I can't believe that at all. Just, what—what's your name?"

Izuku needs to research these people when he wakes up. If they're real, he's going to shit himself. If they're not real, well, he's still going to shit himself.

The man doesn't hesitate in the slightest. "En. Though you might know me as something else." His head tips. "You usually call me Sixth."

It's like a brick has been thrown in Izuku's face, because suddenly he *gets* it. Really, he should've understood it all sooner, and he feels

stupid for not connecting the dots the moment he saw himself and Yagi, but can you really blame him?

Actually, yeah, probably. There is no excuse other than the fact that Izuku was trying to figure out what was real and what was not real.

"You…" Izuku's words die in his throat. He glances at Banjou and Shinomori, and the weight of the situation falls on him.

He remembers, years ago, his father's training sessions. He remembers the stories All for One would tell him about how he ruthlessly snuffed out the flames of all the One for All users. On those rare nights where he wasn't feeling as impatient, All for One used to tell Izuku about every single user he ever came across, and he would describe the ones that were the most annoying to deal with.

He would never tell Izuku too much, as he didn't believe in getting stuck up over what's already dead and gone, but he told him enough.

Izuku thinks of the smoke that accompanied En upon his arrival, and he thinks of the wild tendrils that erupted from Banjou's palms. He knows what those powers are. Knows what they mean and what they can do.

Sixth and Fifth.

And Shinomori…

Nothing about him is familiar to Izuku, but his scars tell Izuku all he needs to know.

Out of all the users of One for All, there was one that Izuku's father couldn't touch. Only one.

The others weren't so lucky.

"Not one of those wretched thieves ever lived the long, peaceful life they so desired," Sensei tells Izuku one night, holding onto his son and showing him the stars high above. Out here in the forest where their facility—Izuku's new home—lies, the sky is clearly visible, not polluted by lights from the city. "It was their own fault. If they had only listened to me and helped me create that more nourished, organized world I spoke of, they might have gotten what they wanted. Instead, they insisted on rebelling."

"Why didn't they listen? I would have listened, Father."

“Of course you would have. You’re smarter than they ever were. But I suppose I can’t fault them too much. They were misled by… by my dear brother, Izuku. And all of his headstrong followers. They were all manipulated into doing his bidding.”

Izuku pauses for a moment. He fiddles with his gloved hands, thinking hard, only to gasp when Father reaches down and gently pulls off the gloves without saying a word. That’s right; he forgot that he’s not supposed to be wearing them anymore. He doesn’t have to abide by Mom’s rules now that she’s… gone.

He leans further into Sensei’s side. “What did you do to them? The—the thieves.”

“Why, Izuku, they had no intention of being kept alive. I had no choice but to do away with them. It was safer that way, anyway. I couldn’t let them keep messing around with the minds of innocents. Converting people to the wrong side is something they prided themselves in doing.”

“You… you killed all of them?”

Sensei runs his large hand through Izuku’s hair. “Most. Not all. If I remember, one of them killed himself somewhere far away from my reach. I can only assume he couldn’t handle what he had done. Truthfully, no one is able to live with the weight of those sins for long. One for All curses its users with a short, gory life. That’s the way it’s always been, my boy.”

Izuku shudders and presses his face into the warmth of his father’s jacket, muttering something about how he never wants to live like that.

Sensei doesn't reply. He only keeps petting Izuku’s wild curls, still holding his gloves in a deathly tight grip in his other hand.

A quirk that is too unstable for its owner will cause an imbalance in the body, oftentimes creating lacerations and deep, dark scars along the skin and bone. Shinomori must have tried his very hardest to avoid All for One, but in the end he was killed by One for All instead.

You were the only one he didn’t kill , Izuku thinks, something funny settling in his stomach at the thought. *I know he’s still pissed about you to this day, no matter what he tried to convince me.*

En waves a hand, and a crate appears beside him. He moves so he’s sitting on it with one of his knees to his chest, and he rests an elbow on it. “Your nicknames were spot on. I figured your intuition would match his.”

Izuku swallows back bile. He's talking about his father, isn't he? But maybe, just maybe, he's not. He would sound angrier if he were, right? He wouldn't sound so… enlightened.

"Are we going to forget that he just punched me?" Banjou cuts in, still sounding amused. "We're gonna skip over that? There was no hesitation there.

En turns away. "You've always been so dramatic. It was barely ten percent of his power. You're fine."

At this, Izuku reddens. "Uh, it was actually, like, twenty percent."

"No, it wasn't." En's words are matter of fact.

"Yes, sir," Izuku says, immediately changing up. If En thinks the blow was weaker than Izuku thought, so be it. It's humiliating, but Izuku isn't about to argue it.

Maybe he knows things Izuku doesn't.

Shinomori reappears behind Izuku, making the boy shriek once again. He holds out a pale hand, and Izuku has to crane his neck up to be able to look him in the face. "Fourth," the man says as a way of introduction.

Izuku steps away, moving back toward the safety that is Yagi. He doesn't take the hand yet, not about to subject himself to whatever Fourth's quirk is. That's a wild card, as Father never mentioned this man's abilities—which makes sense, seeing as he probably didn't fight him at all.

Is it teleportation? No, that's too powerful. With a quirk like that, Izuku doubts that Fourth would even consider running away from All for One. He would've had the best chance out of everyone to fight him and win.

It has to be something else. Izuku's fingers twitch, the indents on his palms burning.

In this realm, Extract is nearly nonexistent. It's quiet; almost as if in hiding. Biding its time, maybe. Or it's scared of something.

Izuku isn't sure of anything anymore.

Yagi moves away, however, his golden flames wrapping around Izuku

one more time before leaving him. Izuku squeaks, hurrying to follow after him. He is *not* about to be left here with these three strangers. He's going to scream, and then he's going to cry.

But then Banjou is there, throwing an arm around Izuku's shoulder. He should be heavy, as Izuku felt his weight when he punched him, but somehow he's not overbearing at all right this second. He's lighter than air.

"And I'm Fifth. Welcome inside One for All, kid."

What the *fuck*.

Izuku needs a bottle of wine. His mind goes back to that one day all those months ago when he got his hands on that pretty nice blunt. He wishes he smoked it. That would've been fun. He wants one right now. He needs anything to get his mind off of the fuckery that is this.

He ducks away from Banjou, breaking into a run. "Sensei!"

But Izuku's hand goes right through Yagi, as the man's wispy body seems to dissipate into the air around them. His golden flames cackle one last time, and then he's gone.

Izuku stares into the space he occupied a moment before, hand still outstretched. He has to take a second to reassure himself that Yagi didn't actually die. Banjou said he looks like that because he's living, so Izuku shouldn't worry about it. Maybe he's just… just taking a break? What do vestiges do in this realm? Just walk around? Talk with each other?

Izuku turns around. "Where—where did he—"

He blinks, the words dying in his throat. Banjou, Shinomori, and En are around ten yards away now, watching him. Banjou has his arms crossed, and Shinomori and En are observing silently.

And in front of Izuku, hovering a foot above the ground, is probably one of the most gorgeous women he's ever seen, if not *the* most. She's tall, and she has large, bulging muscles that show clearly due to her sleeveless black bodysuit. Flowing down from her shoulders is a pristine white cape, nearly identical to the one Gran Torino wore that first day. A smaller cape is attached to an angular golden buckle around her waist, and this one falls down to the knees.

He stares at the bright yellow of her large gloves, and then his gaze

travels up.

Long, silky black hair is put up in a half bun, and strands of it fall in front of her face, framing her bangs. It puts more attention on the mole that sits on the corner of her lip.

A mole. Izuku has seen one like that before. The same placement and size and everything. Where. *Where* has he seen it?

Above all, though, it's her eyes that he can't stop staring at. Those gray eyes remind him of the moment before the sky starts to lighten in the early mornings. She's so close to him now that he can see the specks of stark white light in them. They almost resemble the disappearing stars.

It's so unreal that Izuku is taken aback. She's absolutely beautiful.

His breath leaves him, and something about her makes him feel very small. *Shimura Nana,* he thinks, but then Shimura blinks, and he realizes with a start that he spoke her name aloud in an embarrassing whisper.

Her clean boots touch the ground, and her cape swishes behind her. Immediately, a teasing smile tugs at her lips and reveals white teeth. "Seventh is fine, too, kid. I've gotten more used to that one now."

Oh. My. God.

Izuku always knew she was pretty, as both Yagi and even All for One admitted it (though in very different tones), but he just never physically *saw* her before now. Hearing it and seeing it are two different things.

Her voice isn't smooth, but it's not rough either. It's commanding, and it grabs Izuku's attention. It's what a leader sounds like. Funnily enough, her voice alone would be enough to put him at ease in any other situation. It's the kind of voice that tells people *you're safe. I'm here, so you don't need to worry.*

Izuku doesn't realize he's fallen on his ass on the ground until Shimura is kneeling in front of him, that same smile still plastered on her face when she presents an arm.

"I expected you to be more talkative, but I guess I can't blame ya." Her eyes twinkle. "This is jarring, isn't it?"

Only a lot.

“Of course he knows her name but not ours,” Banjou says gruffly, elbowing En, who steps away in annoyance.

Shimura moves even closer, and Izuku feels One for All activate on instinct once more. It turns the atmosphere cold, and his red electricity flows off him in waves. Some of the sparks travel up Shimura’s arms, but she doesn’t flinch away. She just straightens up when she realizes Izuku won’t take her arm and puts her hands on her hips. “Well, up and attem! Are you going to sit there until you wake up, Ninth? Or are you going to get stuff done!”

Izuku stays where he is even as Shimura walks behind him. He stares at her in dismay, not quite believing how she’s acting.

This is All Might’s master. She should… she should be acting differently with Izuku. Out of *everyone* here, she should be acting angry. She shouldn’t be so nonchalant. Does she not know who Izuku is? No, that’s not possible. She has to. There’s no way she doesn’t.

He makes a noise akin to a dying cat when strong hands pick him up by the armpits from behind. Shimura easily lifts him on his feet, but she doesn’t let go. Instead, she bends her knees and *takes off*.

And then they’re soaring through the air with Izuku being carried in a similar fashion to how rodents are carried by predator birds. His eyes grow wide when he sees just how fast they’re going—the other three users are already out of view: mere specks in the distance. The rush that goes through him makes his stomach do somersaults, and he finds his hands instinctively clenching his shirt to try and calm his quickly rising panic.

“Oh my God,” he says to himself, the wind whipping at his face. “She’s going to kill me.”

“Nah. Not this time.” Shimura drops her head to look at him, eyes twinkling. “You really are a funny one, aren’t you? Toshi sure does know how to pick ‘em. Anyway, we’re here now! Look alive, kiddo.”

When they land, Izuku is greeted by a wide circle of large chairs. If he didn’t know any better, he’d even say they were thrones. They’re big, and they have tall backs. Different types of cushioning line the inside and seat, and they are all different colors.

Shimura releases him, but not without clapping him on the back once.

“Well! Whaddya think? I know Banjou already welcomed ya, you poor thing, but this is probably a more comfortable place to chat. This is our lounge area.”

Lounge area? What? They have a *lounge spot?* Is this a damn tour? Is she just going to show him around?

“This one right here is mine, and Toshi’s is on the other side this time around. I keep trying to move it to its original place, but every time I come back it’s always in a different spot than where I left it. I swear, he loves to keep messing with me and he’s not even dead—”

“I’m sorry,” Izuku interrupts, wincing as he does so. “But, I—I don’t know what—what’s happening here. I’m confused. What is this?” His voice turns small at the end, and Izuku has to fight the urge to run. He doubts he’d be able to get anywhere far.

Shimura faces him fully, brows dipping inwards. “For starters, you’re not at all dead, Ninth, so you can wipe that look off ya face. In the real world, you’re still dreaming right now. In fact, that cat of yours is keeping you nice and warm up on your chest. But anyway, that doesn’t mean this is all fake. We’re very much real.” She pauses. “Somewhat.”

Izuku looks anywhere but at her, feeling intimidated. “But—but I’m whole. He—er, Fifth, said All Might-sensei looks cloudy because he’s not gone yet, but then why don’t I look like that? The—the other me looks like him, but *I* don’t. I look like you guys. I’m not—I’m not…”

Shimura takes it in stride, only shrugging. “Your situation is different. You know, it’s only when you got One for All that all of us were able to communicate with each other. Though not even I know exactly why. That’s something you’d have to ask Yoichi.”

Izuku’s brain short circuits. Shimura continues to talk about something else that he should probably be listening to, but Izuku is still focused on what she said before.

Yoichi. *Yoichi.*

That’s…

“You know you’re not supposed to ask about him,” Kurogiri admonishes, dabbing the wet paper towel onto Izuku’s cheekbone. “Have we not had this discussion before, Young Master?”

“Yes, sir,” Izuku says, sounding small. He sniffles, the entire left side of his face still throbbing from when Father smacked him. It wasn’t even a harsh slap—Father has hit him harder before for much less—but it still hurts.

He is nine years old, just about, and he probably should have learned this lesson by now. Yet here he is: a repeating offender.

“So why did you decide to bring up your uncle, knowing that that topic is off limits?” Kurogiri sets the towel aside and then pulls out the healing cream, putting some on a clean Q-tip before gently smearing it on the worst areas.

Izuku hisses, pulling away a little. Kurogiri’s wispy hand holds his chin in place, however, and for that he’s grateful.

“I don’t know,” he admits, lifting up a shoulder in a pathetic shrug. “I just… I thought this time was different! I wanted it to be different.”

“Why?”

“He promised a year ago he would tell me about him. But every time I ask, he says no. It—it doesn’t feel fair.” He says the last part in a whisper, too afraid to say it any louder lest someone else hears. “He’s family. I—I want to know.”

“If he tells you no, you need to accept that. Continuing to ask is plain disobedience.”

“But he didn’t even say no this time! He just—he just turned and—and he __”

“I know. Even still, Young Master. Please. You must be more mindful about the things you say.” A bandage is placed on Izuku’s cheek, and immediately a cooling sensation takes effect. “This is the second time this has happened. You will not get a third chance. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

Izuku fists the fabric of his pants, eyes squeezed shut. “Yes.”

“I’m glad. For the time being, you are confined to your room, which means no more trips to the outside or surface. Among that, you will—what have I told you about looking at me like that? No amount of annoyed faces will sway me from my decision. You must use this time to think about what you will not do in the future so as to avoid this outcome.” Kurogiri’s yellow eyes shift away, as if checking for anyone about to enter the room. “But, in the meantime, I may as well tell you the things Master promised you.”

Immediately, Izuku's eyes light up at the sudden switch up, and he finds himself not regretting what he did at all. Sure, the slap hurt, and he'll never forget the thunderous look that was on his father's face when he mentioned his little brother, but he thinks knowledge is a good enough trade off.

Maybe not enough to do it again, but good nonetheless.

"He's here?" Izuku asks, interrupting whatever Shimura was talking about. His voice is hoarse. "He… my, uh…"

Shimura stares, something unreadable flashing in her expression. "First?"

Izuku blinks. *Is that really who I was calling First? Oh, God…*

Suddenly it all makes sense. The soft words. The gentle redirections. The jokes First would make on rare occasions that were right up Izuku's alley.

The way he always felt like someone Izuku should know but was never allowed to talk about.

"Hey," Shimura says, and she's much more serious now. "I know this probably isn't what you were expecting, but you really do need to calm yourself down here. En over there meant it when he said you wouldn't be hurt. Hell, I doubt we'd even be *able* to hurt you here even if we wanted to."

But you should want to. Shouldn't you want to be hurting me?

"I've found that smiling more helps me. It kind of tricks your brain into thinking you're not as scared." Shimura leads a very reluctant Izuku to the ring of chairs. And that's when Izuku notices one in the middle that he didn't see before. It's smaller, and it has dark red velvet as the cushions, embroidered with black thread.

"I'm not scared," Izuku finds himself saying.

"Really? So you're just anxious?" She laughs, and it's a wonderful sound. It makes Izuku forget who exactly this woman is in relation to him. "Then you're braver than me. I was terrified when I first woke up here. All of us were. None of us really knew what was happening, though Second will never admit it. He likes to act like he knows everything."

Second? He's the one who's mean to me. Izuku really hopes he doesn't

see him here.

“But enough of that. Look at your chair! I knew you finally made your way in here when I saw this chair materialize. It didn’t exist until now. Pretty cool, ain’t it? This place is full of wonders.”

Cool probably isn’t the right word, Izuku thinks, but he doesn’t say this. He’s still trying to get over the fact that he’s here… inside of One for All, apparently, and talking to the very same people his father brutally demolished.

He feels like a rat caught in a trap.

“Ma’am,” he whispers, making Shimura look at him with a funny look.

“You don’t have to be so polite with me, kiddo. We’ve been seeing through your eyes for so long now that I feel like we’re a bit past that. What’s up?”

Izuku bites his tongue. He wants to apologize again, but somehow he knows it wouldn’t be well-received. She doesn’t seem to have any ulterior motives, and she doesn’t act like someone who’d want to hurt him, so he shouldn’t be scared. Not yet, at least.

“What exactly is this place?” He starts. “I—I know it’s One for All, but like, how? How is this even—”

“Possible? I wish I could tell you.” Shimura sighs almost wistfully. “I always believed that past users could meet again inside here, but to be able to communicate and even see through the eyes of the current successor is just… it’s nothing short of magical. It’s more than I ever let myself dream of. I think now we’ve finally been given the upper hand. And it’s all thanks to you.”

“No,” he says without thinking.

“I’m sorry?”

Izuku fidgets. “I haven’t done anything. I’m just as lost as—as you all are. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Then that’s all the more reason for us to figure it all out together, isn’t it? None of us deserve to be alone at a time like this.”

When Izuku looks at her, she has something painfully soft on her face.

She looks so genuine and kind and strong that for a moment, just one, he finds himself believing her.

“Now, sit in that *damn chair already.”*

With a push, Izuku is then falling onto the throne. It’s a lot more comfortable than he thought it would be, as he feels like he’s sitting on a cloud, but it’s still weird. While it’s the smallest chair out of all the other ones, it’s not quite the right size for him. It’s relatively large compared to him, so he feels like an ant.

Izuku puts his arms on the sides, brows furrowing. “Why is it in the middle of everything and not in the circle?”

“I couldn’t tell ya that one, as it kinda just spawned there, but we could move it for sure! Where d’you want it?”

“Um, I, uh, kind of don’t want it at all. Is there any way to… get rid of it?” He winces at the look on her face. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, but like—”

“You’ll regret destroying it if you do,” Shimura says evenly. Her bangs fall into her eyes as she speaks. “Though I’m not even sure One for All will allow you to do such a thing. Each one of us has a chair. It’s a thing.”

“It wouldn’t let me?” Izuku repeats. *Shouldn’t One for All abide by what the users want?*

“You’ll have to try it and find out. But in the meantime, I’ll move yours by my chair. Who knows—maybe then Toshi will actually want to sit near me again.” Saying this, Shimura grabs a hold of the chair with Izuku still in it and kicks off from the ground, floating in air. She begins to bring the both of them to the spot she mentioned, making Izuku let out a little smile of his own.

“Shimura?”

“Yep!”

“If I already had a—a counterpart here, why did I only just now get a chair?”

Shimura sets the chair close to hers, looking satisfied with her easy work. “Simple. It’s because *you,* Midoriya, never come out of that realm of yours. You’re like a little hermit crab over there.”

Izuku frowns. “Realm? What do you mean? Are you talking about the one with the—” *The monsters?* He thinks, but doesn’t say.

She must see his line of thinking, though, as she continues without even a pause. “Nope! Good guess, though. I didn’t expect you to know this, of course, but here, each one of us has our own little… place. Kind of like an apartment! Or maybe a plot of land works better. It’s hard to explain, but eventually you’ll see what I mean. It’s like a safe space, built for only us to go into when we need to have some alone time.”

“All of you have one?” Izuku gets out of the chair and looks up at her when she begins to float on her back.

“Mhm. They’re all different according to our personality and the way we think, so it’s not hard to tell whose is whose. It’s pretty amazing that way. I change what mine looks like all the time, as we have the power to do that in our own realm.”

“Woah. That’s…”

She twists her neck to peek at him from above. “You know, you’re always welcome to come to mine if you want. I don’t mind it, kiddo.”

“I thought you said it was only for the individual user?”

“Naturally, yeah. But if that user *allows* you in, you’re good to go. If they *don’t* want you in, you simply won’t be able to get past the barrier. It can change at any time or not at all.”

Izuku takes a second to process this. “And we can… we can just go in and out from it? As we please?”

“Yeah! As I said, think of it like a little apartment. Or a cabin. Whichever you like; it doesn't really matter. You can do whatever you want there. It’s yours.” She flips herself so she’s on her stomach now, floating without a care in the world. Right here, Izuku can only see Uraraka in her eyes. “I’m willing to bet that the realm you woke up in, with all of those creatures, is your other quirk’s storage facility. What do you call it? Extract?”

Izuku does a full-body shiver at the mention of his father’s offspring quirk, but Shimura doesn’t seem to have any grief over it.

“Since that’s the quirk you first developed, it’s only natural you’d end up there before here. You have to use that pool gateway to get

between these two quirk realms, and when you finally got here, you went right into your own personal little area within One for All. That's probably why you saw your own vestige, yes?"

He nods, connecting the pieces rather quickly. "Yeah! It was like a big dome thing. I exited it through an archway and came up here."

"That's what I thought. Well, Midoriya, we call this the middle ground. Or neutral grounds. A lot of us go here to talk or whatnot if we don't want to be alone. We have lots of meetings right here, actually."

Meetings? Izuku wonders what kind of meetings they could possibly have. They're dead, so what is there to talk about besides One for All?

A lightbulb suddenly pops in Izuku's head. "When All Might-sensei disappeared, do you think he went to his own place?"

"Probably. Toshi spends most of his time wandering about, either inside his realm or inside of ours. He doesn't usually let any of us in his, though—I've only been in there a handful of times."

For some reason, this saddens Izuku. Why doesn't his teacher let the others in? What's the worst that could happen? Is he that introverted? Izuku didn't think so.

Shimura crosses her arms and turns on her side now. "Other times he just stands outside your realm. It's kind of sad to see."

"What? Why would he just… stand there?"

Shimura presents Izuku with a look that clearly says *you don't know?* "Midoriya, kiddo, he's the only one you don't allow inside of yours."

Izuku doesn't think he's heard her correctly at first. He continues staring at her, as if she's going to retract the statement, but she doesn't. She just stares right back at Izuku, as if searching for something on his face.

"Not that I can really blame you," she says, reassuring.

Izuku's heart rate spikes again. "What does that mean?"

"Well, to put it simply, we all have some personal things inside of our places that we might not want others to see. Memories, thoughts, stuff like that. Your realm holds it all. I'm sure that out of everyone in this

place, Toshinori is the one you wouldn't want to let in on all of your secrets."

He blanches. "You're saying that if he did manage to get into my—my realm, that he'd remember everything he's seen when he wakes up?"

"Well, I highly doubt that, but I also can't say for certain. All I know is that you respect him a great deal, and letting him in might be a little too… much. But just know that he's not upset by your decision. Granted, he is only a half-vestige, but still."

Izuku starts to pick at his hair, nerves taking over. "Is—is that how you guys can see everything that I can?"

"That's a little different." Shimura glides back down to her feet. "Since you're the most recent successor, and we live inside of you, everything you do and think—we get to experience it all. No matter where we are. We can tune you out sometimes, sure, but a lot of times we just watch and listen. It's like a movie, almost."

Holy shit, I really do have a council inside my head judging my every move.

"I think that's partially why you could hear us and speak to us sometimes, Midoriya."

"Izuku," he corrects.

Shimura pauses. "Huh?"

"Oh, uh, I just prefer Izuku." The boy picks even harder. "I don't… I don't think Midoriya is…" He struggles to find the right word. "Appropriate."

Not since his stupid father made it up. Not since All for One got rid of Midoriya Inko's maiden name and replaced it with a lie.

Five seconds pass. Then ten. Or maybe they don't, and Izuku is just exaggerating again. Time and space don't seem to flow here.

Eventually, though, Shimura speaks again. "Alright. Whatever you like is fine by me, kiddo!"

Just then, there's a rush of air behind him, and then a plume of smoke: the two from before have returned.

Banjou walks towards them, the remnants of his whips quickly

disappearing into his palms as En walks over to what Izuku suspects is his chair. Shinomori must have gone somewhere else.

“Learned enough, yet, kid?” Banjou asks.

Izuku forces himself not to move away when the man punches him good naturedly in the shoulder. “I, uh—”

“It’s a shame you couldn’t meet the others yet. They’re gonna have a blast with you, let me tell you.”

Izuku stiffens, cringing internally. He still can’t believe he’s met four of the past users of One for All already, and he still has… what, three more to go? One of which is his actual *unc*—

“I think you’re starting to wake up,” Shimura points out, and she’s staring down at Izuku’s body, which is turning cloudier even as she speaks.

Oh, shit. But Izuku isn’t done yet! He doesn’t want to leave anymore. He needs more information! He’s still so confused about everything!

As Izuku feels himself start to slip away, vision going blurry, he turns and meets Shimura’s gaze with panic-filled eyes. “Can—can I come back? Later?”

Shimura grins again, hands on her hips. “‘Course you can, Izuku. You’ll always be welcome here, no matter what happens. No need to worry there.” Mischief edges into her voice. “Though try and wake up here first instead of in your other quirk’s realm next time, ‘kay? It’d probably be safer. Less drowning and all that.”

Yeah, Izuku is going to need to work on it.

The last thing he hears before the realm fades from his mind is the sound of Banjou and Shimura’s enthusiastic farewells, En’s quiet *bye* in the distance, and another voice—this one soft—asking him to return soon.

And despite all of his previous fears and trepidation, all Izuku feels now is warmth.

Chapter End Notes

izuku finally sees the vestiges (some of them) and realizes the truth behind both of the planes in his mind!! i still have a LOT of

stuff to write about regarding the vestige realms and I can't wait to share :)

also this song on yt is just SO Izuku. like if I had to choose one singular song to represent what Izuku is like and his backstory/ aims, it would be this song. I love it so much omg. especially bc he is trying so hard to get away from the darkness and yet by doing what he's doing, he's actually going deeper in.

next chap is the mall visit and some other inch resting feathery stuff 😏

e

match in the rain

Chapter Notes

> im exhausted lmao. winter always manages to bring out the laziness in me.
> also my power/wifi was out for a whole day bc of a storm. i was livid.
>
> this will be a double update, so look out for 61! im publishing it within a ~day. TECHNICALLY they're both one chap,,,, one is just pt 1 and pt 2… so while the mall stuff is gonna be in 61, it's still technically,,, 60. so I didn't lie this time 😈 (I'm so sry I'm terrible at keeping my word)
>
> cw: minor food issues, throwing up

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The bathrooms at UA are cleaner than any other. Izuku would know, as he's been in a ton of bathrooms all his life, most of them communal and public. Being homeless kind of forces you to not be picky, so before he had running water and electricity at his place, he frequented the shelters all around the prefecture.

He still knows exactly where they are and the best time of day to use the showers in them. It's knowledge he doesn't think will ever truly leave him.

The floor of the smallest bathroom in the west wing at UA is squeaky clean, and it's nicely polished. It smells like fresh linen and a hint of cleaning supplies, too, even right near the toilets.

Izuku knows this for a fact, as he's currently hovering over one, hands gripping the sides of it as he dry heaves.

He's not sure what's wrong this time. He woke up feeling better than he's been in a while, so he thought he was finally okay, but then noon rolled around and Izuku was right back to feeling like a walking zombie. His stomach is cramping, and it's like someone has stuck a nail on either side of his head and is pounding them into his temples with a hammer. All he ate was a couple of sandwiches that Lunch Rush slipped him for helping him clean up the cafeteria, but it seems it doesn't matter.

Not eating at all makes him unhealthy, and eating how he's supposed to with his metabolism screws him over anyway. He can't win for shit.

Izuku trembles, feeling warm all over. When he's sure no more is going to come out, he presses his forehead against the door of the stall, relishing in the cold of it. He grips it, wishing more than anything that his body could just stop for once.

"I gave you what you wanted," he says aloud, voice cracked and exhausted, barely a whisper. "Please give me a break."

The only response he gets is the world spinning again around him, forcing him to put his head right back over the toilet. He hates to admit it, but it's probably a good thing he's been benched from all strenuous activity. He can't participate in vigilante work nor heroics training—and this is a good example why.

I don't think Extract is doing this to you, Shimura says in his mind. She sounds hesitant. It's not like her. *This is too sudden for that.*

It's a quirk alright, but not Extract, Banjou agrees. It's too loud for Izuku's liking. It echoes inside him, making him want to take a hammer and beat the nails into his body himself.

Shimura hums. *You might be able to control this more than you think, kiddo. You should stand up and get some water.*

Izuku rubs his hands up and down his arms, hating the prickling sensation he feels on his bad side. "Do—do you both really not have anything better to do than spy on me all the—all the time?"

The silence that follows makes Izuku wince. He doesn't know why he said it, doesn't even know where it came from, but there's nothing he can do about it now.

"Sorry," he says. "I'm… sorry. That was mean."

He gets no reply. Izuku sighs, only to hiccup midway through and cause a few red droplets to land in the water. His stomach drops at the sight of it, as it's been a while since he last coughed up blood, and he eventually moves away from the toilet again and brings his knees up to his chest.

Izuku sits there, ready to wait for however long he needs to until he feels good enough to move.

He doesn't want anyone to see him like this. It's bad enough he has an entire council inside of him watching this go down.

He wonders fleetingly if the vestiges ever compare their lives with each other. Their performances, maybe. Do they rank themselves? Do they judge? From his quick meeting with them, they didn't seem like the type, but that doesn't mean it isn't possible.

Did any of the other vestiges have issues like this when they were alive? Maybe Shinomori did. He knows the man died due to One for All basically taking over his body and careening him towards death, so maybe he was in the same kind of boat.

Was Shinomori alone when it happened? Or did he have someone there to talk to? Izuku hopes it's the latter. Otherwise, it just sounds like a lonely way to go—hiding away in forests and cities and deserts, trying to evade a supervillain's grasp while attempting to strengthen your quirk for the next person taking up the mantle. Izuku personally isn't confident that he'd be able to do that.

While he's always liked being alone, a trait of his that's been borne out of necessity, he's also never directly avoided companionship. At least for those instances where he's sure his involvement wouldn't hurt his new friend.

The Club is probably the biggest example of that. He knows the organization can take care of themselves, so he's never been too worried about somehow damaging their reputation or putting them in danger. The Club *is* the danger. Izuku is just there.

Another shudder wracks through Izuku, bringing him back to reality. He throws up milky red mucus, and by the time he's done, he feels as though his insides have been wrung out to dry.

He curls into a ball for the second time, praying, hoping, wishing, that these symptoms will be easier to manage as time goes on.

He doesn't know how long he can keep it hidden for.

"Are you alright?"

Izuku pointedly avoids All Might's concerned stare. He's holding the boy up by the back of his shirt, and though there's some sternness in his expression, he looks more worried than anything.

"You still have that fever from the other day. Has this been going on for that long?"

Izuku wrings his hands. "No," he mumbles sullenly. "This is a different one. I'm fine."

"If you were fine, you wouldn't be doing these things," Yagi corrects, gesturing with his free hand to the chair Izuku superglued to the floor. Aizawa's rolling chair, to be exact.

Izuku wants to tell him that he would very much be doing this even if he weren't feeling sick, but he knows it wouldn't be well received, so he opts to stay silent.

"Jesus Christ," Aizawa interrupts, pinching the bridge of his nose once he looks at the scene before him. He picks up the bottle of glue that Izuku left at the scene of the crime and then bends down to check just how stuck the wheels are to the floor. He must consider it a lost cause, as he lets out an exasperated, quivery breath, and turns away. "Thanks, kid. You're still grounded."

Izuku feels a tiny bit of shame erupt inside him at how tired the man sounds. But, not wanting to show that regret, Izuku snaps back just as fast. "The only one grounded here is you with that chair. It's not going anywhere for a very long time."

Suddenly, Yagi transforms with a plume of smoke into his large form, and in the next second he's putting a foot up on the side of the chair and kicking it with all his might.

There's a terrible, *terrible* ripping sound, and then the wheels of the chair disconnect from it as it flies in the opposite direction, smacking into the wall.

Well, there goes that.

All Might bends down and plucks the superglued wheels off the tile with ease, unfazed.

"Nevermind," Izuku says weakly.

By the end of the scolding, Yagi has extended Izuku's no-strenuous-

activity period by another week, saying that it's obvious the boy needs some more time to calm down and heal. Aizawa has also confined Izuku to the teacher's lounge whenever he's not in class, which is *super* annoying.

But Izuku has the good sense not to argue this time. He doesn't want to end up like the chair.

That doesn't mean he can't be upset about it, though. He complains to Yamada about it before classes start, and the man only sympathizes with him a little bit. "Ya know, at the very least you could've used temporary glue," he says, giving him an amused look over his glasses. Izuku, who is currently sprawled out over Aizawa's empty desk, sighs.

"It wouldn't have been as funny, though."

"Maybe not, but you're not having so much fun now, either, yeah? Being confined here like this."

"No, but it's still stupid," Izuku says, stretching like a cat and debating whether or not he should push the pencils off of his other teacher's desk. "He can't ground me again. I'm not his…" He trails off, thinking hard. "I'm not a kid."

Yamada stops his typing to look at him again, his voice slow. "I think, sometimes, that your actions may tell him otherwise."

Izuku's expression sours. "Everything I do is childish to him. It's unfair." He sits up on the desk and crosses his arms, lowering his voice to mimic Aizawa's. "It's always *don't do that,* and *stop doing this,* and *don't even think about that* . Blah, blah, blah."

His rant makes Yamada chuckle. "Listener, you superglued his property to the floor. I think this time you can admit that he's right in being a little upset."

"It's the school's property, not his, Yama."

"You know what I mean."

Izuku huffs and turns away from him, rolling his eyes. "Now *you're* being unfair," he mutters.

A fuzzy pen hits Izuku's cheek and gently bounces off him. "Hey, now don't be getting grouchy with me, kiddo. There are no sides here."

The boy dips his head. “Sorry. He just… he just makes me so mad.”

“So I’ve seen.” Yamada lets the words hang in the air for a moment before continuing on. “Midoriya. When I said we’d go to the mall this weekend, do you remember what I said had to happen first?”

Izuku nods, wide-eyed.

“Tell me.”

“You said that I needed to, uh, heal first. At least good enough to be cleared by Recovery Girl.”

Yamada’s gaze is imploring. “And?”

“And… that I… need to try my best to rest?”

“Uh-huh. And do you think you’ve been resting as of late?”

At this, Izuku is confused. “I—I haven’t been patrolling, so, yeah.”

“You think running around campus and defacing the school is resting?”

Oh! Well, that took a turn. “I—”

“You think all your behavior recently has done any good for your healing process?”

It might be the even tone that does it for Izuku. The way it’s sharp yet not over the top. It makes Izuku flush, and he nervously kicks his feet and looks around. The answer Yamada is looking for is obvious, so Izuku doesn’t drag it out. “Um… no, sensei.”

“Okay. So, if you want to heal faster, what should you do?”

Gee, how humiliating is this? Yamada is talking to him as if he’s four. “Lay off the pranks,” he whispers, getting the gist.

Yamada knocks his knee against Izuku’s foot, which is still dangling over the edge of Aizawa’s desk. “Not all of them. I’m not asking you to sit here everyday and do nothing, kiddo. I’m just asking you to choose your battles, okay? You really do look dead on your feet. It’s worrying me, so please behave a little more if it means you’ll stop straining yourself, got it?”

Izuku nods, looking like a kicked puppy. “Yes, sir.”

He understands what he means. Yamada basically told him that if he keeps pulling pranks, he won't be going to the mall. He's just too nice to say it like that, Izuku guesses.

He wonders how long it'll take until the man gets too tired of the politeness.

Izuku tries. He really does.

But once Yamada has left to teach a class, leaving Izuku alone with the only other occupant in the room, it doesn't take long for the urges to start again.

His throat is tickling. His limbs twitch with the desire to do something, anything at all. His mind tells him that if he doesn't move around in the next five seconds, he's going to become paralyzed.

So, really, it's not his fault. Technically. Mostly. In the eyes of the law.

He still maintains that he's not that impulsive, though. All of his decisions are well thought out.

"Hey," Izuku says, standing up from his hiding spot under All Might's large desk. He's made a sort of burrow there. "I'm going."

Vlad King looks at him after taking a sip of his soda. "No the hell you're not. You're supposed to stay here and think about your actions." He pauses. "Or something like that."

Izuku gives him a look that clearly says *really? Do you even care?*

The boy lifts his chin, his Expert Negotiator side kicking in. "I promise to stop pranking you for a day if you let me go and don't tell anyone. I'll come back, so don't worry about being held responsible."

A beat of silence. Izuku can see the hero thinking. Eventually, Vlad scoffs. "You must be stupid if you think I'm actually going to—"

"A whole week."

Vlad King's breath shudders. "You have yourself a deal.

Izuku's freedom comes with a cost.

He's not sure if it's worth it, though. He'll just have to weigh it out later.

He hums this one old theme song (Pink Panther, he thinks) to himself as he makes his way to the back entrance of the school. This is the only spot where the alarms don't work in the mornings, as teachers usually come in through this way. Since Izuku was added to the approved list of staff, he can slip out this way and nobody will know.

Right here, he is the epitome of stealth. He manages to evade all of the wandering teachers and wayward students making up a test or going to the gym.

Izuku sees the door and speeds up, butterflies fluttering around in his stomach at the idea of what he's about to do. But then when he rounds the corner, he senses Kayama walking up to meet him. He doesn't exactly have anywhere to run, as the vents in this wing here are too small for him, so he immediately holds his hands out in front of him and closes his eyes, beginning to walk like a zombie.

He likes to think he makes a pretty decent sleepwalker.

Kayama sees him and tips her head, letting out a *huh, that's weird* . Izuku doesn't stop, though. He can't! He instead trudges right past her, making sure to nearly bump into her to further prove his genuineness.

As he continues on, he hears her snickering, and he can feel how amused she is. She's not irritated in the slightest, which tells Izuku that the chances of her snitching are pretty low.

Finally, Izuku makes it to the door. He throws it open and breathes in the fresh air. He hasn't smelt this in what seems like *forever*— when in reality he entered through this door not even two hours ago after Aizawa and Yamada.

Perhaps he is a little dramatic. Sue him for feeling like the world is going too slow for him! He just has this need to go faster than ever before. He needs to finish things before the end. He has no time to be grounded. Or to heal.

God, sometimes—in those very rare moments—Izuku finds himself wishing he actually did get Tsubasa's wings. If he could fly, he'd have

no limits. He'd be able to go anywhere he likes. Maybe even touch the sky!

But then the guilt usually chokes him right after he's had the thoughts and makes him want to rush to the bathroom to throw up.

Izuku jumps from the sidewalk and onto a tree, scaling it with ease. The weakest point in the UA gates is not by the concrete trail leading to the parking lot, so Izuku will have to cut through the grass to get there. But Aizawa specifically said that he wasn't allowed to touch the grass outside, so that's a no-go. He didn't say Izuku couldn't touch the trees, though.

It's perfect logic.

Izuku uses the carefully spaced out trees as stepping stones. Boost warms him up fast, allowing him to spring from branch to branch. He nearly trips a few times, but he manages well enough.

He's not traveling this way just to be petty. Truth is, he knows Nezu has motion sensors on the ground this far away from the sidewalk and building, so he literally can't touch the ground without putting out alerts.

When Izuku reaches the one closest to the gate, he crouches there, hiding in the shelter of the leaves, and thinks. It's a pretty large gap—around thirty feet. Boost alone will probably be enough to clear it, however he doesn't just need to worry about crossing the distance. The tree he's in isn't as tall as the gate is. In fact, it's probably close to half its size.

Meaning that Izuku not only needs to be able to jump thirty feet across but also jump high enough to make it over without touching it. How much of One for All will he need? Ten percent? Fifteen might be better, actually. It's always better to overshoot than to undershoot and get hurt. He just needs to get over it. That's all. He's not exactly worried about what'll happen when he reaches the other side.

He's not going to go anywhere. Truly! He's not. He just wants to get over the gate, touch the outside world again, and maybe fuck around in the forest and even go to the convenience store around the corner for just a few minutes before coming back.

He wants to do this so Principal Nezu knows that he's only at UA because he hasn't truly tried to escape yet. The leash they have on him? It's slack. And they need to be aware of that, if they're not

already.

“Okay! I hope y’all are recording. This is either going to be really fucking cool or really embarrassing.”

Banjou laughs. *Praying for the last one, kid.*

“I always appreciate your confidence in me, sir,” Izuku says, giving a mock salute to himself. He then tenses his muscles, concentrating hard. It’s chilly out. Izuku bets it’s about to rain soon. It won’t be a storm this time, only a light drizzle. But it’ll be like this for the rest of the day if the clouds above have anything to say about it.

Izuku shivers, hesitating a little more than he probably should. He left his jacket in the teacher’s lounge, didn’t he? It’s too late to go get it now, though. That’s just asking to get caught. He’s smarter than that, at least. Besides, if he gets worked up while running out in the forest, he won’t be too cold anyway. Now he just needs to make the jump—

“I don’t think you’re supposed to be out here, pup.”

Izuku shrieks. He feels his soul leave his body, and he bets that his vestige back in the One for All realm loses a bit of the clouds covering him, as he really did feel like he just about died.

It happened again, didn’t it? Someone managed to sneak up on him again while he was talking to himself. Curse his fucking illness. It’s making him inexperienced.

Izuku very nearly loses his grip on the branch he’s on, but he stops himself from falling ten feet at the very last moment.

When he looks down, Hound Dog is right below, staring up at him. His emotions are tightly contained, so Izuku isn’t able to sense much of anything coming from him.

The pro hero is very tall. Hairy, too. Right now, though, he’s not wearing his hero costume, meaning he doesn’t have his muzzle on. Izuku is glad for that, for some reason. Each sentence Hound Dog utters has a sort of growl to it, as if it comes from deep within his throat. A little bark is heard sometimes too. Izuku has seen him around campus, but he’s never really talked to him and has mostly stayed away from him. From the times that Izuku has seen him get angry, he’s a little scared of him.

He’s a licensed professional, too. A doctor. Maybe not the *operating*

kind, but a doctor nonetheless. Izuku doesn't want someone like him watching his every move and judging him, making assumptions where he ought not to.

"Uh, hey, sir!" Izuku stutters, trying his very best to look innocent. "And no, no, I'm allowed out! Why wouldn't I be?" He laughs nervously.

"Because you stole more of Power Loader's toxic superglue and, as punishment, were confined to the lounge for the day."

Jesus. Does everybody know now? It only happened like, what, an hour ago max?

Hound Dog must sense his growing inner turmoil, as he tips his head and smiles a little, the corners of his chops twitching up. "A message was sent in the chat to let everyone know to watch you."

Great. Now Izuku is even more embarrassed. A group chat? They have a fucking *group chat?* And they all talk about him?

What did you expect, Ninth? Shinomori asks seriously. *You are quite popular.*

Izuku would be touched if he didn't know that Fourth wasn't meaning it in the best way.

Hound Dog glances from where Izuku is crouching in the leaves to the gate. "Were you planning on jumping over?"

"No, of course not! I was just, I was—!" He cuts himself off, words dying in his throat. Nowadays, it's getting harder and harder to lie. He just doesn't really see the point in it anymore. He already has enough important secrets. Why bother with lying about stupid shit? It's tiring. It's not… usually like him. He doesn't like that feeling.

The first drop of rain hits Izuku in the back of the neck, and he rubs it off, brows furrowing. The temperature is dropping even faster now.

"Yeah," he finally says. "I was, actually."

"That would be one large leap," Hound Dog says consideringly.

"I would've made it."

"I didn't doubt it." When Izuku doesn't say anything else, he continues. "Can you come down?"

Izuku doesn't answer immediately. He fidgets, unsure of what to do. When more rain starts to soak Izuku's clothes, he speaks. "I can't."

"Why?"

"The grass. I can't touch the grass. Aizawa told me I couldn't."

"I'm not Aizawa," Hound Dog points out, as if that's any reassurance. "But I'll help, pup."

Izuku doesn't have any time to register what the fuck he means by that, because then Hound Dog is *jumping up towards him.* And *wow* does the hero have some leaps! Izuku can't even move out of the way in time, as Hound Dog's speed is faster than Izuku's reaction time at the moment. The pro hero grabs Izuku around the middle with one large hand (is it considered a paw? Izuku doesn't know) and lands gracefully back to the ground, practically cradling the boy in the crook of his arm.

Oh my God. He's not as tall as All Might but he's nearly just as buff.

"There," Hound Dog says gruffly, beginning the walk to the sidewalk some three hundred feet away. He doesn't let Izuku down yet, probably content in letting him rest there so he won't have to touch the grass.

Izuku finds himself speaking to fill the silence. There's just something about the counselor that makes Izuku *want* to talk, despite his fears. "Sir? How did you find me? I thought I was well hidden."

"I smelled you."

"Oh." Yeah, Izuku should've figured.

"You should know that I am a part of the security team here at this school. When I'm not inside working, I'm out here patrolling and checking out blips on the cameras."

Ectoplasm is on security, too, Izuku remembers. They must rotate with a few of the other pros at the school.

"The moment you stepped outside the building, I knew of it."

And you just watched me that whole time? To what, see what I would do? Izuku doesn't voice this, though. He sits there, trying to decide if he should feel uncomfortable or not by being carried like this. He

probably shouldn't complain, actually. Anything is better than being held bridal style. At least this way Izuku gets to sit up and see everything that's happening without having to strain himself. It's like a car ride!

And since Hound Dog is tall, Izuku gets to see the world from another perspective.

They reach the sidewalk before long, and Hound Dog allows Izuku to hop off of him. The hero doesn't let Izuku go, however. He places a hand on Izuku's shoulder and steers him back to the entrance of the school, seemingly unbothered.

Izuku's next words escape him before he can think of the consequences. "You're a lot nicer than I thought you'd be," he whispers.

He jolts immediately after he's said it, about to rush to explain himself, but Hound Dog's chest only rumbles with sharp laughter. "Am I? How's that?"

At the assurance that he's not about to be flung halfway across campus for his tactlessness, Izuku continues awkwardly. "I'm, uh, I dunno. But I just thought you'd be, like, mean and scary. Or something. But you're… not."

Hound Dog hums, and it's a low, deep sound. "Well, I'll tell you a secret, pup. I'm only ever mean and scary when I'm upset at something. Like when I'm talking to criminals."

Izuku frowns. "I am a criminal."

"Not the kind I need to be mean and scary to." He glances down at him. "Seems like we can't always believe everything we see in the media."

Something about the way he says it makes Izuku's insides warm up despite the cold rain. Izuku turns and looks up at him, wanting to ask how he's so sure, but he doesn't get the chance. Extract ripples in Izuku's mind, and a wave of frustration and concern hits him like a brick.

Shit!

Izuku hears Yamada before he sees him. The tapping of his foot is heard clearly even over the light thrum of rain. When the boy drags

his gaze up to meet him as they approach the back of the school, he feels some part of himself shrivel up and die. Yamada's mouth is set in a thin line, and his brows are furrowed in that one particular way that tells Izuku that he's irritated by something.

It's one step before the *Eyebrows of Disappointment* stage. Izuku is fearful.

He would've stopped dead in his tracks had Hound Dog not pushed him firmly forward by the shoulder. His presence is a saving grace for Izuku right now, as the boy is fairly certain that Yamada won't scold him too badly since someone else is there to witness it. That's where he and Aizawa differ.

Izuku sticks close to Hound Dog's side, hands starting to shake.

Okay, so technically he didn't pull a prank. All he did was try to escape! That's not bad, right? Really, Yamada has no reason to be upset. Izuku was just going to have some fun! Off campus. Away from his teachers. Without them knowing! It's, like, the most safe thing ever!

He's innocent.

You sure ain't the brightest today. I'd slap you upside the head if you were my kid, Banjou says out of nowhere.

Izuku's eye twitches. *For what? Being just like you? Hypocritical ass—*

"Midoriya, it's raining. You shoulda at least had your jacket on!" Yamada pulls Izuku the rest of the way up the steps when he gets close, making sure he's under the overhang. He uses his own jacket (not the leather one, thank God, as that one would've hurt) to wipe the rain off of Izuku's face and hair. "It's gettin' to be freezing out here, kiddo. The hell were you thinking?"

"I didn't think it would rain," Izuku mumbles under his breath, looking at the space beside Yamada to avoid his gaze.

"Speak up a little, please," the man says, tapping his ear. "But even 'sides that, you know you're not supposed to be out here without asking. That's been a rule for over a week."

Izuku shifts on his feet, indignance making him ballsy. He's not sure why, but in the past day or so, Yamada has become increasingly more strict with him. It makes Izuku nervous, and it throws off the systems

he's set up in his mind. "Yama, it's—I didn't think it'd be a big deal, though! It's just *outside*. It's not like I'm—like I'm leaving the country or something."

Yamada stares at him for a second, as if surprised by his response. But then he crosses his arms, and—yep, there they are. Those goddamn eyebrows. They're there. Izuku feels his throat close at the sight of them. Yamada's disappointment and firmness leaks into the air around Izuku, suffocating him. It makes him feel even smaller than he is.

"You don't get to tell me what is or isn't a big deal, son." He glares down at him from behind his glasses, which are slowly fogging up. "What has gotten into you? Did you forget what I told you this morning?"

At the reminder of their previous conversation, Izuku's confidence leaves him completely. He shrinks in on himself, an uncomfortable feeling settling in the pit of his stomach.

The man opens his mouth again to continue, but before he can, Hound Dog cuts in, reminding Izuku that the counselor is indeed there. He's been standing off to the side thus far, quietly observing their interaction.

"I don't believe a lecture is needed right now," Hound Dog rumbles, moving closer so he's right next to them. "The pup was with me, Yamada. I was watching him."

Yamada doesn't back down so easily. "He wasn't supposed to be out here to begin with, Inui." In a lower voice, he adds pointedly, "You know he's being hunted right now."

Hound Dog chuckles a little. "I never said his actions were excusable. But, do they have reasons?" He glances over at Izuku with an imploring look. "I reckon so. And it's not like he managed to get past the gate, anyway. So, no harm, no foul, yes?"

"Inui."

The two teachers hold each other's gaze for a long moment, seeming to have a silent conversation that Izuku is not privy to. Hound Dog's eyebrows (his hairs are long, as all dogs' are) raise up, as if trying to make a point or remind Yamada of something. It seems to work, as Yamada relents after another minute.

He turns back to Izuku, something unreadable in his expression. But

Izuku's quirk tells him that Yamada is actually feeling relieved now, which is weird. He'll have to think about that more later, when he's not feeling as bad as he is.

"Come on, then, let's get out of the rain." He leads Izuku inside, making the boy put on his large jacket so he's not as cold. His voice is a little terse, so Izuku remains on edge. His teacher is obviously still upset, so he'll have to be careful.

Izuku isn't sure why Hound Dog was defending him, but he's sure not going to complain. Instead, he gives Hound Dog a quick, thankful look behind Yamada's back, the corner of his lip twitching up into a small, hesitant smile.

"Thank you for getting him," Yamada says to his coworker, jabbing a thumb behind himself to point down the hallway. "We'll get going now, but I'll… talk to you later?"

Hound Dog nods, and it looks to Izuku like they're having another one of their weird silent conversations. "Of course." He turns to Izuku and holds out a large hand, eyes gleaming. "And it was nice speaking with you, Midoriya. I hope to hear more from you soon."

Izuku takes his hand, brain fuzzy. He wants to hear more from him? Is he talking about… therapy stuff? Or just in general? Izuku Isn't sure.

"Yeah," Izuku says, "maybe."

Yamada beckons Izuku along, and the boy isn't feeling too keen on keeping him waiting, so he quickly lets go of Hound Dog's hand and waves in another meek goodbye.

Izuku feels his heavy gaze on his back as he walks alongside Yamada, but he doesn't look back. He's too busy trying to calm the fluttering of nerves inside him.

He keeps his eyes on the floor in trepidation. It's not often that Yamada is this upset. All the times in the past where he has been like this ended with Izuku getting thoroughly scolded (and rightfully so, most times). So to have Yamada be so silent? To just allow someone to cut off his lecture? It's almost terrifying.

They walk through the halls, back towards the teacher's lounge, Izuku guesses, and for part of the way there, Yamada doesn't make a sound. He doesn't hum a tune or strike a conversation; he just checks a few times to make sure Izuku is still following and continues on.

It's only when they're more than half of the way there that Yamada says his name.

Izuku swallows. "Yes, sensei?"

"There are groups of villains out there that know your identity, right?" Yamada continues at Izuku's nod. "And due to the recent events at Hosu, I think it's safe for us to say that they will be working with even more rigor to try and catch you. I thought your building was proof enough of their determination the first time around."

He has you there, kid, Shimura says, prompting Izuku to shut all of the voices out for the time being. They don't need to witness this conversation. Izuku won't allow it.

"And it's not just villains anymore. Heroes will be looking out for you, too."

"But—but the heroes don't know about my ide—"

"All it takes is one of them to know and to spill it to everyone else. It would happen so fast that we wouldn't even be prepared for it, Midoriya. We have to assume the worst case here. Who knows if… a certain top hero… will take to the stands one day? It could happen right now. And we wouldn't be able to stop it."

Izuku counts the tiles below him. He makes sure not to step on the lines. He shortens his steps so he touches every other successive square tile, and he counts them. His insides are coiled up tight, wrapped like a rubber band, and doing this is the only thing that'll help him not snap.

Yamada has an aura of nothing but concern and support and determination right now, and it gives Izuku whiplash. He doesn't understand it. He doesn't enjoy it. How can someone who is constantly expecting the worst to happen possibly be so… soft. And comforting.

Izuku doesn't deserve that comfort, does he? What has he done to deserve it? Lied, cheated, and stolen, that's what.

Yamada brushes his knuckles against Izuku's shoulders in a soft punch. "I don't mean to scare you or make you freak out. That's not the point of this. I'm just trying to make you understand that the risks of going out there without telling us—any of us—far outweigh the benefits you currently see. It's just too dangerous. You have so many

bad people looking for you, and I know you say you're prepared, that you're ready for it, but you're not, kiddo. You're really not. No one is ready for that kind of stuff."

"All Might would be," Izuku says, more as a way to lighten the air and try to calm the pressure in his chest.

It doesn't work, though.

"No, he wouldn't," Yamada says flatly. "And I'm sure he'd agree with me. But as I was getting to, the root of this discussion isn't that you shouldn't have gone out there, it's that you shouldn't have gone out there without letting someone know. If something happened to you, kiddo, we would've had a hard time tracking you down. We wouldn't even know what happened. Do you get what I'm saying?"

Izuku rubs his arms. "Yes, sir. But I wasn't gonna go far. I just… I don't know. I wanted…"

"You wanted to get caught on purpose. Once you came back, that is."

When Yamada puts it like that, suddenly it really dawns on Izuku just how stupid he's been. Why did he ever think Yamada would let something like this slide? Especially after what he said this morning? Yamada enjoys the pranks; he laughs at them, he encourages some of them, and he always makes sure to tell Izuku how much he enjoyed them after the fact.

But Izuku guesses that trying to fuck around off campus without anyone knowing isn't exactly a prank so much as it is actually being idiotic and immature.

Izuku knows the risks more than anyone of doing something like that, of straying more than he should, but he just didn't *care*.

It's not like he's going to tell Yamada that, although it's highly likely the man already knows it.

The boy doesn't have a good reply to him, so he just bites the inside of his cheek and goes back to counting the tiles as they walk, much slower this time. "Yeah. I—I know it's stupid. It won't happen again. I'm… I'll, uh, I'll be better."

Yamada makes a negative noise. "It's not about being better. It's about *doing* better. You're a good kid. Always have been." Yamada lets his hand rest heavily on Izuku's head. "You just need to work on being

safer."

And that… that's doable. It sounds easy, the way Yamada puts it. So it shouldn't be difficult.

So why does Izuku still feel so hesitant? Why is the Earth spinning around him? Sure, Izuku doesn't exactly think he's being unsafe, but he's also not going to argue with Yamada again. The least he can do is listen to him and respect his view on things. Who knows where Izuku would be without Yamada's guidance the past couple of weeks?

"And, Midoriya, I thought we made this clear that day when we were going over house rules, but it appears not: if you need help, you need to come to us. You need to say something. I can't always help if you don't ask first, alright? You need to be able to trust that we'll all be there to help you out. You shouldn't have to feel like you can't tell us things." At this, Yamada stops in his tracks and turns to Izuku. "You are in control of your actions. A large part of healing and resting is up to *you.* Not anyone else. Shouta can ground you all he wants, and I can have as many of these conversations with you as I see fit, but none of that is going to do anything as long as *you* don't want it to. Hell, even trying to strap you down wouldn't work." He shakes his head. "Kiddo, I can't force you to stay in one place anymore than I can convince Vlad to stop wearing that shitty cologne every day."

Izuku smiles, and this must be the reaction that Yamada was looking for, as the voice hero crouches down a bit to garner his full attention before he continues.

"But what I can do is tell you my stance on certain things and remind you of the rules we agreed upon. I— *we* will always be here for you to rely on. That's something that will never change. The rest, though? That's up to you. Got it?"

The earth is no longer spinning out of his control. Rather, it's just swaying a little. Izuku thinks he prefers this better than the uncontrollable tilting. He wonders how it stopped, and then realizes with a start that maybe it was Yamada. He's been changing how Izuku interacts with the world for quite a bit of time now. Maybe he's responsible for this too.

"Got it?" Yamada prompts again, still just as patient; there's not a spark of heat in his voice.

Izuku nods jerkily. "Yeah."

“Rockin’. Now, come on. You’ve still got a couple of minutes before class.”

They start again towards the lounge, and while Izuku feels lighter than he did when the conversation first started, something is holding him back.

He takes a deep breath in and walks closer to him, sticking to his side almost instinctively. *He said I can talk to him, so I shouldn’t keep this inside. I should ask him. I should. He wouldn’t laugh. He wouldn’t be upset.*

“Yama?”

“What’s up?” He pops the ‘p.’

“Are we still going?”

“Goin’ where?”

Izuku appreciates that Yamada isn’t looking at him yet. It makes these kinds of questions easier to ask. “The, uh, the mall.”

Yamada doesn’t hesitate. Izuku has a feeling he already knew what he was talking about but just wanted to hear him say it. “Do you want to go?”

I didn’t at the beginning, but I do now. I’ve been… looking forward to it. And it’s so crazy to think about, but it’s actually been driving me to continue on and not run, even. I want to go with you. I’ve never gone with anyone but Kacchan before, and I don’t remember the times Mom took me.

He wants to know if it’ll feel the same—going with Yamada versus going with someone like Kacchan.

“Yes,” he says, quiet and maybe just a little embarrassed.

“Then we’re going.”

Izuku frowns. “But you said that if I—”

“I’m not gonna hold a mall trip over your head, Midoriya. That’s cruel.” He looks at him through the corner of his vision. “When I said you wouldn’t be going to the mall if you were injured, I meant it. *That* is something that I would never allow. But, I had a talk with Chiyo an hour ago. You have been healing, despite all of your little escapades. If all goes well, you should be fine to go out for a few hours without

impeding on that.” A grin splits his face. “Plus, you nearly did make it to the gate, didn't you? Ya didn't even set off the motion sensors, or else I would’ve been pinged. So, you must’ve been using the trees, right? If you’re healed enough to do that, then I guess a little mall visit should be fine. It’s just a lot of walking.”

“I like walking,” Izuku says immediately.

“You like running,” Yamada corrects.

“Only when it’s towards people and not away from them. Running from people like Endeavor was never as fun as I told the media it was.”

“You sure made it look like fun, though. And I think that’s why the people loved ya so much, kiddo. You did what they probably always dreamed of.”

Izuku has always been a representative of the people. That’s what he’s tried to be for most of his time as a vigilante. He helped people in ways that he knew heroes wouldn’t be able to, and he never quit even when he should’ve.

Yeah, maybe that is exactly why Rabbit became so adored.

Izuku listens to the drizzle of rain on the windows to their left and pretends like he didn’t notice how Yamada was speaking in past tense.

Izuku is half asleep and scrolling through his Twitter when there’s a knock at the bedroom door.

It’s not closed, as he doesn’t like to close it all the way nowadays. It would be harder to leave the room in the event that something happened, so he elects to always leave it at least cracked. Besides, the cats move around a lot during the night.

His back is to the door, and he doesn’t bother shifting around on his back when he calls out a *come in.*

There's a long pause, and then: "Hey."

Izuku blinks. He stares hard at his phone screen, not processing what he just heard yet. Because for one, he was expecting Yamada, and two, that's not usually how either of the adults in the house greet him.

Something's up.

But before the worry can overtake Izuku, the irritation does. He shuts his eyes, grip tightening on his phone. Why the hell is there a goddamn underground hero in the doorway? That's so uncalled for.

"No," Izuku says loudly. "Leave."

Aizawa huffs dramatically, which causes Izuku to crane his neck to glare at him. The man crosses his arms and leans against the frame. "You just said to come in."

"I wasn't paying attention." Izuku turns back to his phone, but he doesn't actually pay attention to the videos he's liking. "I thought you were Yama, but you're not. Which means you can't come in. Did you not see the signs on the door?"

"Are you talking about the drawing of me you made? The one with a huge 'x' scribbled over it?" There's a small ripping noise, and Izuku guesses he's taking the paper off the front of the door to look at it again.

It has a variety of profanities and dicks drawn all across it, simply because Izuku knew it would annoy Aizawa the most to walk past it every day.

"Because yes, I did see it." Aizawa's voice goes a little lower. "Hard not to with the amount of glitter you used."

Even as he says it, Izuku can just imagine the glitter falling off it and onto the carpet. There's a reason he went for cat-safe glitter.

Izuku smirks at his screen, smug. "I was talking about the six other ones I made underneath that one, but yeah."

Aizawa snorts. There's silence for a few more moments, but then Izuku feels Aizawa walk a little closer. His quirk is a low buzz in Izuku's mind. It feels, dare he say, almost soft this time.

The door is pushed closed, but not all the way. The man probably

knew Izuku would throw an absolute fit if so. He's always been observant. He notices all the patterns.

"I came in here to talk to you," Aizawa says.

Izuku squeezes his fist against his chest. "I couldn't have guessed."

"Hizashi told me what you did."

Izuku sighs internally. Of course he did. He didn't actually expect Yamada to keep quiet to save him the trouble. He can't blame him. "He already talked to me about it," he grumbles. "I don't need another person to scold me."

"I'm not going to do that."

"That'd be a first."

Izuku winces right after the words leave his lips. He's not meaning to be so… aggressive. Or to be such an instigator. But the way Aizawa has walked into his area, into his safe space, and cornered him like this—it's making him defensive. He has to force himself to relax so he doesn't snap his phone in half.

But Aizawa doesn't seem angry. He doesn't snap back at him, and he doesn't even make any kind of irritated noise. Izuku isn't able to feel his emotions, hasn't since the hospital fight, so he can't truly be sure of how he's feeling, but he figures it's safe to assume he's not just acting.

"It would be a first, wouldn't it?" He moves around. Izuku's every nerve is on hyper vigilance mode.

What is he trying to do?

If he's not here to lecture again, or to tell him something related to school, why is he here? Speaking so casually to Izuku? And so out of the blue? They were having their silent war during dinner again, so Izuku didn't think anything was going to change for at least a while more. Izuku didn't want it to change!

Right?

"I think I've done more arguing than I have talking with you, and that's…" He trails off, seeming to gather himself. "That's never ended well. We've done this before back in the very beginning."

Back when they were still doing their cops and robbers act, he means. Izuku knows exactly what he's talking about. Mostly because he's been thinking about those days a lot now. Reminiscing, he might even call it, except he's not old.

Aizawa continues, voice slightly strained. "We shouldn't be allowing ourselves to go backwards like this, kid."

Backwards. Into the negative area. Even back before the starting line. Izuku's heart rate spikes at the word. When the hell did this come on? Why is Aizawa speaking like this?

"What's your point?" He asks, a little more harshly than he intended.

"My point is that I should've handled things differently."

The silence that hangs in the air after the declaration makes Izuku pause. Slowly, he turns his head around again to stare at him, startled. "Huh?"

"At the hospital. And… everywhere else. I should've done things better."

What the fuck? Izuku's blood is pumping fast. His thoughts are going a million miles an hour now. He isn't sure what to make of this. This is so fucking *weird!*

It's not in character for Aizawa at all. He's not exactly admitting to being wrong, but he is saying that he could've done things differently, and that's pretty much the same thing.

Izuku blinks rapidly. "Did you get hit with some kind of quirk or something?"

"No, kid."

He swallows hard. "Then did—did Yama put you up to this? Is that why you've been sleeping on the couch for the—for the past week?"

Yeah, Izuku didn't miss that. Sometimes, in the dead of night, he has a bad dream and wants to check the perimeter of the apartment to make sure no one has broken in. Imagine his surprise when he saw Aizawa on the couch for three nights in a row.

One night could've been seen as Aizawa just accidentally falling asleep while working, and two could've been seen as both of them needing a

break, maybe. But three?

“Among other things,” Aizawa admits lowly, “but no.”

“So why are you here? Actually, don’t answer that. Just leave me alone. I swear I’m going to file a restraining order one of these days —”

“I’m here to apologize.”

There’s a moment right before a dead leaf falls off a tree after being caught in a good breeze. First there’s that slow tearing, and then the stem of the leaf is breaking apart, detaching from the branch.

Izuku, just a few minutes ago, felt like that dead leaf. He was clinging onto a dying branch and just waiting for that one nice gust of wind to give him a reason to flit away.

Now, though, he thinks that wind has come. He’s going to start his descent down any moment now.

It takes a good thirty seconds for Izuku to react. Eventually, he sits up, brows pinched together. He glances at Aizawa, taking in the way he’s standing there, arms crossed, staring anywhere but at Izuku.

His hair is up in a ponytail, allowing for the moonlight coming in through Izuku’s window to illuminate his face completely. Sensing his gaze, Aizawa’s eyes flick toward him, and this time he holds it.

“You…” Izuku struggles to find words. “You’re joking.”

Aizawa doesn’t say anything, which tells Izuku all he needs to know, actually. He’s not kidding. He’s being real. He’s serious.

Immediately, bile rises up in Izuku’s throat. He doesn’t like when people apologize to him. It makes him uncomfortable, as he’s not used to it. He can never tell when they’re genuine anyway.

Apologies from other people always seem fake to Izuku, as why would anyone ever regret treating him how he deserves to be treated?

“This probably isn’t what you want to hear now,” Aizawa says after a bit, “not that I blame you, but… I am sorry, Midoriya, for the way I treated you—for the way I *am* treating you.”

Izuku opens his mouth and closes it right after. He licks his lips to get rid of the dryness, and he lets go of his phone so it drops in his lap.

“It’s… fine. You don’t have to—to apologize.”

What dimension has Izuku fallen into? He’s off the branch. Why hasn’t he hit the ground yet?

Aizawa shakes his head. “I do have to. But I also *want* to. I know it won’t change the things I said or make up for it, but I need you to know that how I talked to you that morning at the hospital… it wasn’t right. And I should’ve known that.”

But Izuku was being just as mean, wasn’t he? He was just as cruel, just as pushy. It’s not just Aizawa’s fault. Sure, Izuku was only matching Aizawa’s energy, but that doesn’t matter.

Kuro never thought it did, at least. He always advocated for equal responsibility and action.

“You know you’re not supposed to hit your brother,” Kurogiri tells him one day, and he’s holding onto Tomura’s wrist as he speaks, keeping it high above the boy’s head so he has some leverage.

“I don’t care!” Izuku cries out. He’s standing on the other side of Kurogiri, using his cloudy smoke as a barrier between him and Tomura, who’s still fighting to get to him. A red mark is blooming on his cheek now, and Tomura has a matching one.

Except Tomura’s is dark, already turning into a bruise. Izuku didn’t mean to use his new enhancement power, but he was just so upset that he couldn’t help it.

“He hit me first!” He says loudly. “Kuro, he always hits first! It’s not fair!”

“So that gives you the right to use your quirk on him?”

“Yes!” Tears threaten to run down Izuku’s cheeks, and they’re hot and burning. Why does Tomura always have to get away with it?

Kurogiri sighs, and it’s slow and long. His yellow eyes flicker, dimming slightly before going back to its neon color. “You two are lucky he’s not home. This would have ended much quicker, I believe.”

Tomura hisses in frustration, now trying to kick at Kurogiri to get him to let go. “Go ahead! Tell him anyway! I don’t give a shit what he thinks!”

“You’ll watch your words,” Kuro warns. “It seems I need to revisit that lesson on respect with you again, Tomura.”

“The hell you do! Let go or I’ll turn you to dust!”

Izuku sniffles, entire body shaking with unreleased energy. Something about the superpower Father gave him is making him antsy. He’s been having these outbursts more often, and it scares him. It scares him because he doesn’t regret it.

Mom wouldn’t be proud of him. It hurts to think about.

Easily, Kurogiri pulls Tomura in front of him, using his clouds to block his flailing limbs from touching anyone, and tugs Izuku’s wrist around so he’s facing his brother. “The both of you need to apologize to each other.”

“I am not apologizing to that little brat! He fucking hit me, Kuro!” Tomura spits.

“Because you hit him first. You are far too old now to be picking fights with Izuku, Young Master. He is only seven. You’re acting wildly immature.” Kuro’s gaze falls on Izuku. “And you should know that resorting to violence isn’t the right response. Is that not what your mother taught you?”

Izuku’s cheeks redden, and he wants to argue, wants to scream and shout that this isn’t his fault, that Tomura is just always making him feel bad, that he’s making Izuku forget his own mother, but he can’t get the words out.

“Now, apologize. Please.”

Izuku tries absentmindedly to remove Kuro’s grip from his wrist, but he’s not actually doing anything. It’s more of a comfort thing. The boy hangs his head and wipes his nose with a bandage-covered arm. “I’m sorry, ‘mura.”

“Shut up!” Tomura snaps. He itches his neck, and Izuku sees that he’s shaking too. “I’m not doing this!”

Kuro lets go of Izuku, and in one quick movement he’s stepping closer to Tomura and using his free hand to force his ward to drop his head in a more respectful manner. “I wasn’t asking. Apologize to your brother or you will be taking over his cleaning duties for the next month and a half.”

“What? You don’t have the right!”

“Two months. And all of your gaming consoles will be mine until you can prove to me that you are mature enough to have them.”

“You’re out of your mind if you think I’m actually going to listen to the shit you have to say! You have no authority over me and you—!”

The air turns cold suddenly. Izuku feels a little jolt inside his chest, almost like a shock being administered to his heart. Tomura and Kuro’s conversation is dull to him. All he knows is power and familiarity and comforting danger. And that’s when he feels him.

Father’s home.

Thunderous footsteps come towards the door, and the arguing stops at once. Izuku can tell by now how his father sounds when he’s in a good mood, and also how he sounds when he’s in a bad one. Those quick footsteps don’t mean anything good.

Izuku’s eyes widen at the same time that Tomura’s does. Quickly, his brother’s red eyes find his, and there’s no more malice in them, only something like embarrassment and—and what did Father say that was? Fear?

“Sorry,” Tomura says quickly, barely more than a whisper. “Sorry, ‘zuku.”

Izuku almost really does start crying at that. He rushes toward him, eyes watering, and stands on his tiptoes to wrap his arms around him. Tomura, for once, doesn’t push him away.

Kurogiri lets go of Tomura before the door opens, and it’s just in time, too.

The three of them know how to put up a facade.

The point is, it doesn’t matter who starts the fight. Or whoever throws the first punch. If you participate, you’re at fault too.

And Izuku, although you’d have to stab him multiple times in the chest to even have a possibility of him admitting it aloud, very much feels at fault here. As much as Aizawa is at fault? Eh.

But maybe that’s his wounded pride talking.

Anyway, why does Aizawa feel the need to apologize? And he’s not even asking Izuku to give one back! He’s… saying it just to say it.

“I… I don’t…”

Aizawa scratches at his stubble. “Mic is better at this whole talking thing. You know that. I… have a hard time with feelings. I’m not good with them. It’s hard to control my fear sometimes, kid. That day, I was

angry, and… and, admittedly, I was frustrated with myself more than anything. I took it out on you, and you didn't deserve that. Especially in the state you were in."

Fear? Izuku searches his expression. God, he wishes he still had the ability to feel Aizawa's emotions, as he so desperately wants to see how he's feeling. He wants to know if he's lying, or if he's feeling something drastically different to what Izuku thinks he is.

Izuku watches, lips parted, as Aizawa moves forward. His movements are slow, they always are nowadays around him, and in another moment there's a dip in the bed where Aizawa sits down.

He isn't sure if he hates the closeness or not yet.

Izuku purses his lips and looks away. "Did you memorize all that from therapy or something?"

The comment leaves him nastily, bitterly, and he waits for the retaliation, for the snark he can always count on, but all he receives in reply is a gruff *or something.*

Why are you doing this? What do you want me to say? Izuku is grasping at straws to figure out what this means. He doesn't like this new feeling welling up inside him. It's unfamiliar. It makes him feel like he's back at the facility and hiding behind Kuro as he tries to get Tomura to stop being so violent. Like he's six again and clinging onto the arms of a monster while being carried away from a crime scene. *How do you care enough to even apologize to me?*

"I'm not expecting you to say anything," Aizawa reassures. He's perched on the edge of the bed, looking entirely out of place. "Nor am I expecting forgiveness or—or whatnot, alright? That's not what I'm here for." He lets out a breath, as if he's convincing himself to keep going. Izuku wonders if he would've done this sooner if he had the chance. "But I think we also need to talk about—"

"I don't want to talk right now."

There's a considering, patient hum. "I know. That's why I said you don't have to speak."

"No, I mean I don't want to listen to it either. Not—not now." Izuku's words, though firm, quiver a little. He's not sure when he'll next want to have this discussion, but all he knows is that now is not that time.

He's not in the right headspace for this. He's just going to fuck everything up more, and all of Aizawa's efforts will be put to shame.

The hero sighs softly, and it's not frustrated, just upset. It makes Izuku's insides coil. Aizawa seems to not be as hot tempered lately. He wonders what's changed.

"I get that, kid, I do. But we can't keep dancing around each other like this. That's not what we're supposed to be. The only way we can trust each other and work together is if we're all on the same page. We can't be at each other's throats."

Izuku takes in these words, staying quiet for a moment. He agrees, really. While he tries to act like it's funny and that he enjoys it, their little arguments and fights are making things difficult for Izuku. Emotionally and physically. He doesn't like being mad at Aizawa. He doesn't like not being able to talk to him, to go on patrol with him, to joke with him.

It's not the same anymore, all things considering.

For just a second, Izuku lets himself believe what Aizawa said. He allows himself a moment to just believe everything. He doesn't question it, doesnt ask if he's lying, none of that. Because he knows deep down that even if they were lies, even if Aizawa was just making everything up, he'd eat it all anyway. Each and every lie. Izuku is so achingly hungry for that attention, for that care, that it wouldn't matter either way to him.

Toxic, fake, or real—any kind of support is the kind that Izuku will accept here.

Izuku wants to apologize back. Wants to make Kurogiri proud. He wants to be able to send Aizawa funny memes again at ass o'clock in the morning and then get scolded for it upon waking up for being up so late.

But something is holding him back. It's like there are chains at the back of his neck and connected to his wrists, and they're attached to the walls around him. Truthfullt, there is some part of him that doesn't want to let it all go yet. He doesn't think he can.

Even for such a genuine apology, even with the assumption that Aizawa is saying all this from the heart (something that *never* happens), Izuku can't do it.

And so he breaks his gaze and turns away, beginning to lay back down on the bed. “I’m tired.”

“That’s fine. If you let me speak for just a couple of minutes, I promise I’ll leave you alone for—” He breaks off when Izuku sends his foot into the side of Aizawa’s leg and hip, forcing him to stumble off the bed. “Hey! Jesus, okay, I’m off! I’m going, kid, I’m going. We’ll finish this later then. You just tell me when.”

Aizawa rubs at the sore spot on his leg before walking over to the door. Izuku tracks his quirk, noting the way he pauses at the doorway. He closes his eyes and pushes his face into the pillow.

“What do you want for breakfast?” Aizawa asks abruptly.

Izuku snorts, head immediately popping back up. “Are you bribing me? Seriously?”

“No.” Izuku can clearly hear his eye roll as he speaks. “Mic asks you all the time what you want for breakfast. Why is it different when I do it?”

“Because you never ask. It’s suspicious.”

“Only because I’m never the one to actually cook breakfast now. I’ve been busy.”

“Exactly, so why are you asking me now? You’re bribing me. You’re a briber.”

Aizawa ignores him. “Pancakes? Rice with egg?” He thinks for a second. “McDonald’s?”

This bastard. He knows Izuku can’t resist fast food! His mouth waters just from the thought of a nice stack of breakfast burritos and hashbrowns. Despite this, though, Izuku will not lose. “I don’t care,” he mutters before turning back away from him. “Get out.”

“Aye, aye,” Aizawa says sarcastically, and Izuku welcomes the change in tone. He sounds more Aizawa-like than he did before. Before he closes the door, Aizawa keeps his hand on the knob and says, very quietly, “Night, Midoriya.”

Izuku stays silent.

Chapter End Notes

i rlly like favoritism - clairo on youtube. reminds me of Kurogiri for some reason.

things are going to be,,, a little more fast paced soon. I hope you guys are ready. We have reached chap 60. We are 60% of the way thru the fic (god I'm fcking old), and I know I've got a lot of stuff and content I still need to explore and wrap up before the end. Believe me, I will get to everything (and I won't rush it, so no worries. I will take care of everything like glass) but just be prepared for things to start happening 😈‼️ i started this fic when I was a freshman in high school, and now I'm a senior and I'm just. i rlly wanted to get this done before graduation in may but that doesn't seem likely :) I guess Izuku will follow me into college

h

snuffed out

Chapter Notes

feathery feathery shenanigans

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are seventeen separate locations for the lounge that criminals call the *Underground Club.* And that's only on this side of Japan. There are no doubt quite a few more scattered about in the other parts of Japan and even beyond. Their influence knows no limits, apparently.

It's almost impressive how fast the organization grew. The handful of vigilantes he managed to grab and scare the shit out of admitted to knowing about the Club and a little of how it worked, so at least now Keigo has some background information. He's been gathering proof for weeks now—he's just been biding his time.

It's never smart to walk unprepared into places as dangerous as these ones are.

Keigo has gone through ten out of the seventeen locations already, but he hasn't found what he's been looking for. It's tedious, and it's frustrating just as much as it is interesting, but Keigo doesn't exactly mind it. Because of his performances as of late, he's been given more freedom by the Commission to do as he pleases. They won't be watching him too closely, so he's in the clear to conduct some personal investigations.

He has time to spare, so he's going to make the most of it today. It's morning, not night, which is the best option for him with these kinds of people.

There are more of them at night, as that's when they all gather, so it's safer to go in the morning. There will be less waiting to oppose him. It'll also buy him some time.

It takes seven seconds for the strategically placed guards on the corners of the neighboring roofs and buildings to be taken out. It takes seven seconds for his feathers to prick them at that one nerve that makes anyone and everyone drop to the floor.

They'll wake up in about half an hour. That's plenty of time for Keigo. That's all he needs. That's actually way more than he even wants.

He doesn't take the front entrance, no. He's not so naive to think he'd be able to get through there undetected. Especially since he had to storm the other ten locations head on to check things out. He's sure that the other Club areas are on high alert.

The thing is, he was told by a scared little birdie that this location is a little different than the others he's been to.

It's special.

This one, luckily enough for Keigo, has an underground entrance. It was apparently specially made for their champions—or, the Club's current highest ranking members and bodyguards. It seems they've got a hierarchy here.

Keigo is extremely excited for this one. He has a feeling things are going to go just swell.

The cameras are taken out first. With his sensitive feathers, he's able to sense even the tiniest of electrical currents or battery-operated devices. Every single one of them in a quarter mile radius is destroyed by the time he lets his boots touch the floor of the tunnel he uncovered.

His feathers return to him, and just in time, too, as it becomes obvious then that this tunnel isn't exactly *only* used by champions anymore. It's quite crowded! Huh, maybe it's used more as an underground roadway for criminals. The dozens of wide eyes that stare back at him would make more sense then.

Keigo stares, shocked. After a moment, though, he smiles brightly and gives a little wave. "Heyo!"

The greeting has barely left his mouth fully before a barrage of projectiles is sent his way. And this is just a wonderful way to start, isn't it? Keigo can't help but laugh.

In seven seconds (he does love that number), he's cleared the tunnel in its entirety. The criminals—some he recognizes and some he doesn't—are at his feet now, unconscious. They look like dead flies, almost.

Snagging a long trench coat from one of the fallen villains, Keigo walks up the steps to the back entrance, wondering just how secret it is anymore. His informant could have very well lied, though the beating of his heart indicated otherwise at the time. Some people are just skilled like that.

He covers his wings and slides on his glasses as he walks in, and he's thankful that he's just in another secluded hallway. Because now he knows where he's at, and this is the best outcome he could've hoped for.

At least he won't have to encounter any guards yet.

Keigo walks and goes directly to the first door he comes across. Just as he was told he would, Keigo sees the small print on the frame: *Dr.*

Oh, perfect. Keigo reaches into his pocket and takes out the prescription bag he kept from Rabbit that night. The medication name was on the side of the bag, but it didn't pop up at all when Keigo researched it. This told him that whatever it was had to be something new. It had to be untested, illegal, and specifically crafted for a certain situation. Maybe it was even made for Rabbit specifically.

All of his searching has led him here. He can only hope he's found it this time.

The door is locked, but it's no match for Keigo's strength. He knocks once, twice, calling out a sweet greeting, and then gives it a *little* push with the help of his wings. The door falls right off its hinges.

Keigo doesn't have time to move out of the way before the bullet shoots toward him. His head snaps to the side, his wing coming up as a shield. The bullet shoots right through the feathers, though, as he didn't even have time to harden them. It grazes the side of his face, splitting the skin on his cheekbone, and embeds into the wall behind him. Before he can retaliate, boots are hitting his chest and sending him careening.

Well, Keigo thinks, noting the way that his attacker deliberately pushed him away from the man in the back, the very man he is trying to get to, *this will be a fun warm up.*

"You know, I have to admit, I didn't think you all were so protective of each other," Keigo pants. "You guys really are family, huh?"

Blood runs down his face and neck in thick rivulets, dripping onto the

previously pristine floor. Oh, that'll turn into a nice scar. Keigo is impressed.

Sharp pain rocks his world, and it's only due to his extensive training that he doesn't outwardly react to it. He straightens up from where he's standing in the middle of the room, and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"It was almost poetic," Keigo continues, shaking out the sweat and debris from his wings. "How entertaining, too! It was a shame your buddy didn't stand down though." He gestures lamely to the limp man in the corner of the room. Well, half of one.

The other pieces of the man are somewhere in the hallway.

"You're fucked," the doctor hisses, slipping in his own blood as he tries to sit up. He gasps when he only slides back to the cracked ground, and when he blows out the breath, red comes out with it.

"Nah, trust me, he'll be alright. I don't usually kill anyone unless they're my target." As if on cue, Keigo turns to see the limbs he cut off from the other person start to slide across the ground on their volition, back to its owner. "See! I knew that healing aspect of his would pull through. It was so cool to watch the first time around; I just had to see for myself how far it could go. You know how it is."

Keigo lifts up his leg to allow a hand to pass by, and he watches with bright eyes as it slowly reattaches itself to the stump on the end of the dead man's hand. The veins rewind, the tendons and nerves stretch to connect again, and the bones mend.

In just ten seconds, the hand is back to normal. The other limbs follow suit.

Keigo turns to the doctor, a self-satisfied smirk on his face. "Speaking of. That can't be his quirk, can it? From what I saw, his power just allowed him to change the concentration or density of any organic material. That's why my blades had a hard time cutting through him at first, yeah? He could harden his skin to the point of being like steel. Gotta say, he almost had me there. I'm not good against tanks like him. He was near invincible."

The doctor ignores his musings and instead reaches for a fallen syringe on the ground next to him. He takes it in his shaky hands and prepares it, and Keigo only observes it when the man jabs it in his thigh with a muffled cry of pain. Dark black liquid rushes into him, and it takes a

good five seconds for it all to enter.

And then the syringe is thrown off to the side, and the doctor is collapsing again, his breathing slowing down.

“Ah, so that’s probably why Mr. Hard On over there could regenerate so nicely,” Keigo exclaims, noticing how the blood sucks right back into the gaping holes his feathers left in the doctor’s shoulders and abdomen. The skin sews itself together like patchwork, and it’s horrifyingly awesome. “I was right! It’s not a quirk at all. Just some kind of drug. You probably shot him up with it right before I flew in.”

At this, the doctor lets out a scornful laugh. “Just some kind of drug,” he repeats, shaking his head. “How close-minded. Most usually call it a miracle, but that works too.”

Keigo crouches down before him, that same smile ever present on his face. “You made a drug that brings someone back to life, so what? For heroes like me, a villain having even a dozen lives after their first one won’t stop us from taking them out. ‘Sides, it looks like it’s got some flaws.” His eyes zero in on the other guy, who’s still unconscious. At least he’s breathing now, though. “Seems like it takes a while to actually get you up and moving if you’ve actually kicked the bucket. Still working out the kinks, I bet?”

“I don’t give this shit to just anyone. Villains aren’t welcome here, so they don’t get it. *You* aren’t welcome here either.”

“Ope! I am, actually.” Keigo hops to the side and searches the pockets of the trench coat he snagged earlier. Finding what he’s looking for, he jumps back and presents it with a wink. “See! Here’s my membership card.”

The doctor huffs and forces himself to sit with his back against the wall. “You’re a real piece of work, ain’t you? Reminds me of someone else I know.” He looks Keigo up and down, his skin glittering. It puts the hero on alert again. “I wonder how many times the Commission had to beat you black and blue to get you to be this way.”

Sometimes, Keigo wishes that people would just be quiet. It would be so much smarter to shut the fuck up, but unfortunately not many people care. Some like to play with their own lives.

Like this man, for example. He was very slippery to get a hold of. Both in general and physically. Touching his skin causes excruciating pain on the opponent, which Keigo figured out fairly quickly into the fight.

It was pain unlike any other—the kind you could feel in every nerve, inside your bones, and deep within the crevices of your brain.

When Keigo touched him, even with his feathers, all he knew was hurt.

“You know, if I were on duty, I’d have to kill you for that,” Keigo says flippantly, staring straight through him. “I don’t care how many times it would take. You would eventually just stop wanting to use that *miracle* drug by the time I’ve torn you apart seven different ways.”

The doctor, to his credit, doesn’t look the least bit perturbed, and so Keigo continues as if the threat never happened.

“Densaku, isn’t it? Let’s put aside everything that just happened for a minute. I’m a big fan of your work. But I must say, you’re very hard to find! You don’t have a last name listed anywhere, so I had to do things the old fashioned way.”

“I don’t have fans,” is all Densaku says.

“I’m honored to be the first then. Now, on to the important matters!” Keigo leans even closer, mindful of where the man’s hands are at all times. “Do you know Rabbit?”

“Who?”

“I appreciate you trying to waste my time, but let’s not be too dense here. I’ll humor you.” Keigo quickly pulls up the photo he has saved of the vigilante on his phone. “This little guy right here is who I’m talking about.”

Densaku narrows his eyes, and Keigo tracks the blood that slips out of them. It must be a side effect of the drug, as the other guy has the same thing happening to him from where he’s moaning and groaning.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Densaku tells him, shrugging. “I see him all the time.”

“Is that right?”

“Every single day. Usually between nine and eleven PM.” When Keigo opens his mouth to respond, Densaku cuts him off quickly. “On Wash’s nightly news show, I mean. Did you see their new documentary on him? It’s a total flop.”

“You’re so hilarious.” Keigo’s next words betray his cheery tone. “What do you gain by keeping quiet, Den Den?”

As if hearing the oncoming warning, the doctor only tilts his head back, as if inviting. “If you kill me, Hawks, you’ll only be responsible for a lot more innocent deaths. But people like you don’t care about that, right?” Densaku doesn’t waver. “You rarely care for the cursed like us.”

Keigo steps back at the dramatic declaration. With a small roll of his eyes, he digs out the package he shoved inside his jacket pocket and throws it at him. “I know you manufactured the medicine Rabbit relies on. It seemed really important to him, so I just want to know what it is and what it’s for.”

“Why?”

What does it matter to you? God, you’re so irritating. I wonder if this is how I come across to other people who don’t really know me. Eesh.

Or maybe that’s the point. Maybe that’s how Keigo wants himself to be seen. It’s less suspicious that way.

“I’m trying to help him out. He seems like a good kid. He just has a lot of determined demons.”

Densaku hums negatively. “Help never means the same thing to us as it does to those like you.”

Keigo blinks slowly. “I wish to *save* him. I have the means to protect him. He’s barely even fifteen.”

The doctor laughs again. “I bet you think you do have the ability to save him. Kid, not even I could help him the way he needed in the eight years I‘ve been around him. Believe it or not, there are far worse monsters a man can face besides you.”

“Either I help him by giving him another chance at life, or someone else will have his head on a pike. And I’d rather not let his potential be wasted.”

“Sorry, kid, but it’s confidential medical information.” He doesn’t sound sorry at all despite the words. “I will not share Rabbit’s stuff with anyone, much less a random fraud like you.”

“Fine. That’s something I can respect! But… I have one more question.

Can you share his instead?" Keigo swipes once on his phone, and a video of a green-haired boy sheepishly accepting his second place medal at the UA Sports Festival is shown.

He watches Densaku closely, gauging his reaction. He wishes, hopes, *prays,* that he'll say something. That he'll admit what he knows aloud just to make things easier.

But when he looks up, his expression is blank, and his tone is even. "You really are a fucking leech, aren't you?" He begins. "You just latch on and don't let go until you think you've had your fair share."

"Yep, that's me! So is that a yes?"

For a moment, they engage in a staring contest. Densaku seems to be searching his expression for something, not that he'll find much of anything at all. If there's one thing Keigo is good at, it's locking away the disadvantageous emotions.

Eventually, the man seems to reach a decision, as he just jabs his crooked thumb in the direction of a broken safe in the opposite side of the room. "Very bottom row. It'll be in a folder titled AFO. There's a sample of the pill in it, too, so don't be careless with it. It's not suitable for anyone else but him."

His feathers are bringing it to him before the doctor can truly finish his sentences.

"AFO? What's that?"

"Doesn't matter. Now get out."

Keigo, not one to overstay his welcome, obeys. He dips his head and makes for the door, eyeing the documents and notes inside of the folder. Oh, this is just what he's been looking for. The ominous pill is in a taped Ziploc bag, and the sight makes Keigo almost want to squeal in excitement. "Thanks for this," he makes sure to say, but before he can leave, Densaku calls out to him.

"You really shouldn't have come here, Hawks. If he ends up hurt, I'll know who it was." His eyes glint in the faint light. "And then you'll have half the underground waiting to rip out all your feathers one by one."

Keigo gives a Cheshire grin. "Duly noted. Bye, bye!"

He leaves just as the invincible man in the corner starts to move around. He takes the trench coat along with him, deciding that it'll be good to have; it's a designer brand.

He's been needing jackets big enough to cover his wings anyway.

When he makes his way back to the tunnel, though, he stops in his tracks.

Honestly, he should have expected this.

All of the criminals he knocked out are alive and well, crouching down in various areas of the tunnel, some on the walls, others in the rafters high above, and even more on the ground and ready for him.

But there are nearly five times as many as there were, meaning they called for backup. A lot of the people in front of him are wearing civilian clothes and masks on their face to conceal their identity.

Someone must've called for help, and every single one of you dropped whatever you were doing to come. Incredible!

Keigo recognizes some of them. He swears he's passed them before on the streets and even given autographs to some of them. They seemed like regular people to him then, but he guesses that's just how it is.

So the rumors are true, he guesses. Club members are nothing but predators hiding in plain sight. There are more of them out in public than one would think. Hell, they could even be one of Keigo's workmates, as stupid as that is.

He wouldn't be surprised either way.

The light from the end of the tunnel barely reaches where they are, about half a mile away from it, but it's enough for Keigo to be able to see all the knives and various blades pointed in his direction. He hears the buzzing of quirks and the swishing of mutant limbs, but other than that, there's total silence.

They're not attacking him yet, only observing. Coming out of the Club, he could barely even sense them, even with his feathers scouting ahead. Someone must have a cloaking quirk of some sort. If it were a device blocking his senses, he'd still be able to hear the device itself.

They could've rushed him at any time, Keigo notices. They were waiting.

Oh, he's almost giddy! When was the last time he's had such a thing happen to him? Not since he first became a hero and had to prove to all the scumbag villains that he was worthy of his fast growing rank.

What a powerful group this is. If only they'd decided to go the hero route instead. They'd be far more likely to do good much easier.

But Keigo also isn't naive enough to think a heroic life would be possible for most of these criminals. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, the world just doesn't allow it. This is why Keigo has a certain kind of respect for the Club. Seeing everything at the other locations made him realize a few things.

There's also a reason the Commission hasn't stormed them yet. To the President, it's not worth the bloodbath that would ensue. They're a necessary kind of evil, so to speak.

"I was just leaving!" He says loudly, gesticulating innocently with his hands. "And don't worry! They're just fine in there. Regeneration drugs are so handy dandy, aren't they?"

He stretches out his wings and flaps them a couple times, moreso to show strength than anything else. The coat falls to the ground, and he's only a little upset over how dirty it's getting. It's hard to get that kind of material clean.

When they don't say anything, Keigo claps his hands together. "Tough crowd! I guess I'll just be going then if—"

"What makes you think you'll be leaving today?"

The calm voice makes him pause, his smile frozen on his face. He turns, and there she is.

She's on one of the middle platforms jutting out from the curved wall of the tunnel. Leaning against a pillar, arms folded, she gives off confidence that Keigo knows she never used to have. She's taller than he remembers, and it looks like her true form has changed, too.

As he watches, her skin starts to glitter, and her scales come alive. Her pointed tail elongates and gleams, refracting faint light in every direction. Her horns curve around twice above her head, and the poison dripping out of them looks more like acid now.

"Hey, I know you," he says, teasing. "We've been trying to get our hands on you for quite a few years now. How's freedom treating you?"

Kaida isn't fazed. "Better than they ever did."

"Oh, don't I know it!" Keigo puts his hands on his hips, subconsciously counting how many people are in the tunnel now. Some of his feathers detach and hang beside him, preparing possible routes, and in turn he sees the criminals tense up even more.

Kaida's scales break off and rise up to meet his feathers, one for each, and there's a gust of air as her iridescent, near transparent wings send her flying to the ground before him.

How wonderful of a quirk that is. She is almost an exact copy of Keigo, except where he has bird wings and features, she has lizard ones. She could've been something great, even though she was practically created through laboratory testing and genetic remodeling through various mutants. He remembers faintly the times he'd see her training in the room next to his with her own agents. They were supposed to become heroes at the same time, as the Commission wanted to see who would be the better hero, but Kaida never made it to graduation like Keigo did.

She took everything she could. The only thing she left behind were the mangled bodies of the agents assigned to her.

His wings twitch at the memory of finding them that day. No, maybe she *is* something great. She got away from the grasp of the Commission while she could, and that's more than Keigo ever did. That's the best scenario anyone could have hoped for.

There were more than her, too. Keigo was never the only trial they did.

But the others didn't graduate either. Keigo was the only one left in his 'class' by the end.

"Didn't think you'd be putting your talents to use here," he says, instinctively sizing her up. "Bet you're the champ of this region! That would be cute."

"Not anymore. But I can show you why they still call me one."

The threat only makes him grin cheekily. "Go right ahead," he says, voice a little lower now. "Give me your best." He holds out an arm and taps at the inside of his wrist, right where they both know his vitals reader is. "Even if you could kill me, they'd know it the moment it happens. My location will be pinged, and then none of you will be

alive by noon. Families, friends, even pets! They'll all be *gone.* And, personally, I don't think you guys want to start that. Not now, anyway! Not when all of this Nomu stuff is going on." He holds her gaze with bright, golden eyes. "And with what happened to the Hero Killer… I'm sure y'all have your hands full, saying as you guys were the ones who failed to stop him to begin with, amirite?"

With not a crack in her stance, Kaida speaks again. "Why would we want to kill you when there are better things to waste our time on?" When she tips her head, Keigo sees a deep, jagged scar running down her throat. "You were never ready for the world to see you as you truly are, Hawks. And you're still not. That's where you and I differ." She doesn't smile at all. In fact, her face is practically emotionless. Keigo wonders if that's another reason she failed. She never bothered to put on a show like Keigo did. "How would society react if they knew one of their favorite pros was a fraud? A killer in disguise."

It's obvious what she's meaning. She's threatening to release it *all.*

Keigo laughs, but he's not smiling now either. "You've always fought so dirty."

"Leave." Kaida steps closer, and her smoky breath travels the distance to dissipate in his face. Her next words are the softest he's ever heard her be, and it makes his wings fluff up. "If you're caught on our grounds again, in any of the locations, I won't stop until I've personally sent all the little pieces of you home to your bitch of a mother."

"I'd never expect anything less."

As he walks past her, he sees the trench coat being yanked up off the ground with some kind of telekinesis, back to its owner, which makes him roll his eyes. He truly can't have anything.

"See ya! Or maybe not," he calls. The criminals part like the Red Sea so he can pass through. He'd rather not fly yet, as he has no clue what kind of traps could be in the air now. He feels them all staring at him, but he ignores them.

He got what he was looking for, so none of this matters. They're not going to do anything. As a top pro hero, they can't afford to touch him at all.

When he finally reaches the end of the tunnel and shoots away through the city, he feels the feather he left behind as a bug get

burned alive. He shivers at the feeling, but really he's not surprised. How could he expect anything different from the group of criminals that brought Rabbit up?

They're just as conniving as he surely is.

Izuku left his phone in the car, and he doesn't exactly feel like interrupting Yamada and Yagi's conversation to ask if he can trek all the way back to the parking lot and get it, so he convinces himself he can live without it.

It scares him, being without communication to his clients and friends, but he can deal. It's only for a few hours, he tells himself. Just a few! Nothing should happen. Nothing should go wrong.

It's wishful thinking, but he doesn't know that yet.

If he had his phone, he would've received the short notification from Dragon Lady. He would've seen the five word text message she sent him that reads *call me when you can.* His clients from the Club would've been able to get through to him and inform him of the breach at his assigned location. But, as it stands, Izuku is unaware of it. He's ignorant to what's currently happening away from where he is.

Rabbit never really is supposed to have a day off.

Izuku's only other option is to ask Aizawa for the keys to the car to go and get it. But that's not a very good plan.

While Aizawa and Izuku haven't exactly said anything mean to each other since their late night conversation, things are still a little rocky. Aizawa, true to his word, took him to McDonald's this morning. He bought Izuku a shit ton of breakfast burritos, hash browns, and mild sauce packets even without Izuku having to ask (not that he would've asked at all, as he knows that it's really expensive to feed him). The poor cashier looked like they were seeing the depths of hell as they listened to their order.

Izuku was ushered over to one of the tables by Yamada right after they put their food in, but that doesn't mean he didn't get to see the

black platinum card Aizawa used to pay for everything with.

Yeah. Sometimes Izuku forgets what their occupations pay them.

Fortunately, seeing as people with high metabolisms and thus large appetites exist in the millions nowadays, the restaurant was prepared for them and got their order filled within ten minutes.

Izuku would be lying if he said it didn't taste amazing.

But anyway, here Izuku is, standing adjacent to Aizawa and walking through the entrance to one of the biggest shopping complexes in the entire country.

It never ceases to amaze him every time he comes here.

"I miss being able to do things like this," Yagi says, sighing happily. He's looking around the same way Izuku is.

"You don't go to the mall much?" Izuku asks him, head cocked.

"Not often. They call me for missions all the time, even for the little things, so I never have time." He smiles, though it looks pained. "Since hundreds of other heroes are becoming more active due to the threat of more Nomu popping up, I've been given a bit of a break here and there."

Izuku frowns. *Huh. I guess there's a little bit of light in the darkness.*

"What about you?" Yagi prompts.

"Uh, yeah, I don't usually come here too often either. Only with Kacchan." Izuku scratches his collarbone, flushing. "We, er, always used to check for your new merch and see what was on sale."

Yagi immediately stumbles, letting out a guffaw. He takes out a napkin just in time to catch the spray of blood. "Oh, *really!"* He descends into a fit of low, amused giggles, hunching over to try and contain them.

As Izuku laughs nervously alongside him, he can't help but hear Aizawa muttering to Yamada some ten feet behind them.

"Why did you even invite him, Hizashi? This isn't a good idea."

Yamada scoffs. "Well, *someone* is ruining the whole vibe of this thing, so I had to bring Yagi along in order to make up for the hole you're

causing, babe."

Ouch!

Aizawa blows out an exasperated breath. "Fine."

Yamada comes up to their side, smiling brightly. "Where to first, y'all?"

"I was thinking we could start on the bottom level and work our way up," Yagi offers. "Go through each store and really take our time. None of us are in a rush, after all."

"Sounds cool to me. Whaddya think, kiddo?" Yamada turns his expression to Izuku, who tries his hardest not to shrink in on himself. Having the attention of all three of them at once is weird here.

"Uh, yeah, that's fine. Kacchan and I used to start at the top, so going bottom first would be a nice change."

"Alrighty!" Yamada says happily, a little bit of his quirk coming through. "Let's get this party started!"

Izuku watches him start to whistle and walk swiftly to where the escalators are. Yagi gives Izuku an encouraging look before following, and the boy hesitates for just a second. Both of the heroes feel… content. It's a new sort of emotion. Izuku doesn't know when he's last felt anything so warm, except maybe besides whenever he's near Uraraka. His friend always feels warm to him, but this is a different kind.

Like a weird mixture between pure joy and laziness. Feels like familiarity, too.

Aizawa passes him with a grunt, hunched over with his hands in his pockets—his signature posture. Izuku concentrates on him, trying to sense him too, wondering if he's feeling something similar to the others, but he can't. There's nothing there.

Izuku looks at the floor, putting his own hands in his jacket pockets before following behind.

It's particularly crowded today, as it's the weekend. Most want to make the most of it, just like they are.

When they make it to the bottom floor, they head for the first little

shop they see—a small business selling handmade crocheted items. Aizawa stays outside, mumbling something about having enough things of the sort, and the remaining three continue inside.

Yagi breaks off and goes to the opposite side of the store, having noticed something he likes. There are pillows, blankets, gloves and beanies, and even sweaters in here! It's a large assortment for a new business, Izuku can't help but think.

With all of the vibrant colors around, Izuku isn't sure where to start himself, so he follows Yamada around as he slowly goes through the shelves and displays on the wall.

Yamada likes to touch, Izuku quickly realizes. He has a thing for how certain things feel, so Yamada brushes his hands over pretty much anything that catches his eye. He'll pick a crocheted plushie up and say something like *huh, this one's cute,* before putting it down and saying the same thing about the next one.

It's like a system.

"What about this one?" Yamada asks, picking up an Edgeshot glove and beanie set. "It's so soft! It's getting colder, so you might wanna make sure you've got the right stuff."

Izuku nods to show he understands, but he doesn't get the set. He just continues to stay beside Yamada, feeling the things the pro picks up and offering his opinion on something when asked.

He's like a lost little puppy. Thankfully, though, Yama doesn't seem to mind it.

Izuku perks up when he comes across an All Might blanket. It's fucking huge! It's seven feet by eight feet, which is just perfect! Izuku loves blankets that he can actually suffocate in.

It's so soft, too. The pattern on it includes all of All Might's past costumes and their colors. In the middle of it is All Might's current one, with the words **Go BEYOND!** underneath it. Fuck, he craves this blanket. He needs it.

Missy would absolutely love it, too. It would be perfect for her!

He must have spent too long looking at it, as Yamada leans over his shoulder to see what he's staring at. "You want it, don't you?" He asks teasingly.

Izuku blushes. “I don’t need it. And—and ‘sides, All Might is, uh, right over there. That’s just—just *embarrassing!* I don’t, uh… I just don’t need it.”

Yamada gives a shark-like grin. “But you *want* it?”

Izuku shakes his head and quickly puts it back on the shelf, moving along the wall to put as much distance between them as possible.

He doesn’t notice the way Yamada takes the blanket off the shelf and heads for the register with his things as well.

“Are you sure you don’t want a new desk? Maybe a new chair?” Yamada taps his chin with a finger. “Maybe even a second desk! You could always use one of those.”

Izuku, who is currently trying and failing to convince Yamada to not buy the entire furniture store, puts his hands up in front of him in a pleading gesture. “I really am fine! The room is perfect the way it is! It’s great!”

“Do you want a bean bag? That’s what kids like these days, right?”

Izuku blinks. “Missy would rip it up. She hates beans.”

Aizawa snorts from beside them. “They’re not actually filled with beans, Midoriya.”

“They’re not?” Yagi cuts in, wide-eyed.

“Yes, they are,” Izuku argues, lifting an eyebrow. “They’re made from expanded polystyrene beans.”

“Expanded *what,”* Yamada and Yagi say at the same time.

Aizawa shakes his head. “Not here they’re not. Most bean bags are filled with micro beads or foam filling nowadays.”

What the fuck? Banjou gasps. *That’s never how it used to be!*

Nana speaks up. *What are you talking about? They’ve always been filled*

with foam or beads, at least in my time. Never actual beans!

You're being delusional again, Shimu—ow!

Izuku throws up an arm. "Why are they called bean bags then? They're fakes. They're lying to their consumers."

"I agree," Yamada says seriously. "It's false advertising."

Aizawa huffs. "Yeah. We can go take it up with the companies that manufacture them. That'll make 'em stop for sure."

"Well, Midoriya can be pretty persuasive," Yagi points out. "I bet he could change it."

"I'm going to cut one open right now and see for myself," Izuku declares, lifting up his chin as he walks further into the furniture store.

"My boy, let's not do that!" Yagi says quickly, snagging him by the back of the collar.

"I guess we'll have to buy one to find out the truth," Yamada says, already pulling out his wallet.

Izuku snaps to his senses and tries to object, but it's no use.

He has created something monstrous.

The store allows them to keep the green bean bag in a holding area so they can come back later and pick it up, that way they won't have to carry it around.

Not that Izuku didn't offer to, though. He was one hundred percent ready to carry it the entire rest of the trip.

But it's too late for that, now. The next store they go into is a geek's dream land! Or, more appropriately, the place where Kacchan and Izuku used to live.

There are more posters than one would ever really need, for fandoms

of all types. There are TV shows, movies, books, celebrities, and heroes plastered all around. Action figures and POP boxes are lined up against the vast walls, and in the far corner of the store are about a hundred bins full of comics.

Izuku has to take a second to really calm down so he won't embarrass himself.

"Welcome back, Midoriya," one of the employees says, waving him in. "Nice to see ya again. It's been a bit! I was getting worried."

Izuku, aware of the way the three adults behind him are staring at him, clams up. "Oh, yeah! I'm good! I was just busy."

"Hey, you missed some of our good All Might sales, but I set some of his limited edition stuff aside for ya to look at if you want." The girl leans in with a whisper. "Ya can't tell anyone, though. We're technically not allowed to do that."

Izuku's eyes light up, and he bites his lip in excitement. "I won't tell a soul," he whispers back. "Thank you so much."

She leads him into the back room, and Izuku has to give an *I'll be okay, trust me* look to Yamada and Yagi before he goes, as they look a little too concerned.

And, okay, maybe it is weird to go into a back room with someone, but he's done it before! In a place like this, it's like the non creepiest thing!

Izuku, please , Shimura begins, sounding defeated. *I can't keep defending you.*

Then don't, Izuku thinks back immediately, too focused on what he's about to see than on what anyone else is saying.

He nearly passes out upon seeing the collection of All Might figurines and toys he's being shown. An ocean of blue, yellow, white, and red greets him. Some of the figurines are tiny, while others are three feet tall. They're all amazingly detailed and realistic, and Izuku thinks briefly that Kacchan would kill to be in his shoes right now.

"Oh my God," he says, and the girl hums in understanding.

"See any you like?" She asks.

“All of them.”

She laughs. “I figured. Well, I’ll be out front if you want to buy one. Just for you, they’re all fifty percent off.”

Izuku swivels around to stare at her. “Seriously?”

“Yep. You’re one of our most loyal customers. You and your blond friend, actually.”

What this tells Izuku is that he kind of has a big problem. His All Might collection was an addiction, almost. He was free from it when it all burnt up in the fire, but now that he has a fresh slate…

A medium sized figure catches his attention in the back of the room. He walks over, and he’s pleasantly surprised to see that it’s All Might in regular clothes. He has a gray shirt on with green pants, and he’s sitting on a chair that looks far too small for him with one leg propped up on the other.

He’s holding a thumbs up, and he has his signature grin plastered on his face. A pristine cape is hanging over the back of the chair.

In this one, he looks young. Fresh out of highschool, Izuku would even say. On the mantle the chair legs are connected to, there are words engraved: “ **You too can become a hero.”**

Cheeks burning, Izuku picks up the figure carefully to admire it more. It’s heavy, as it’s good quality, which makes Izuku even more happy. It’s only then does he remember where this is from.

This outfit and quote is from an interview All Might did during the first year of his debut in Japan. This is when he told the world who he truly was, and what he was going to do to make everyone safer than ever.

He encouraged so many people back then, and he still does now.

Izuku holds it even tighter.

He feels like it’d be wrong to *not* get it. He sure as hell isn’t going to ask Yamada or one of the others to buy it for him, especially not All Might himself! So, Izuku digs inside his pockets, searching for the bill that Kayama slipped him a few weeks ago while saying *buy yourself something nice.*

She refused to take it back, even as Izuku begged, but he's kind of glad she didn't. He's been holding onto it since then, not knowing how to use it, but now he's found the perfect thing.

Quickly, he bolts out of the back room and towards the worker, practically slapping her with the cash. "Can I have a brown bag for it, please?"

"Brown?"

"Anything that's not see through," he clarifies, trying to hide the figure from the view of everyone else in the store. He can feel his teachers somewhere near the front entrance, and he really doesn't want them to notice.

As if on a mission, the girl straightens up with a serious expression. "Understood."

When the figure has been wrapped and hidden inside of his bag, Izuku walks back towards the trio.

"Ooh," Yama exclaims, spotting him first. "What did you get?"

"Nothing!" Izuku says, not suspicious at all.

"That looks heavy for *nothing,"* Yagi notes, and Izuku glares at him.

Aizawa cuts in then, saving Izuku from a potentially disastrous scenario. "We should probably keep going, you three. Some of these stores close early, you know."

Izuku tries not to show how desperate he is when he nods in agreement. *Get off my ass!*

Yamada rolls his eyes fondly but listens. He elbows Izuku in the shoulder as they begin walking out of the store. "Well, I bought a bunch of posters that were on major sale back there. I didn't look at all of them, but maybe you'd want to put some up in your room. It's still looking pretty bare in there!"

Izuku looks away. "Yeah. I might hang one or two up, if that's okay."

"Hell, yeah!" He punches Izuku playfully. "Onto the next store!"

They continue Iike this for another couple of hours, slowly making their way through the bottom floor before going to the second floor. There's not much that Izuku wants, at least not anything that he'd be

willing to ask for, but Yagi actually finds quite a few things.

So Izuku happily carries his bags despite his protests, beginning to come a little bit more out of his shell. The more he's with them, the more comfortable he feels.

Aizawa has a couple of small things, but Izuku isn't sure what they are. He didn't see it when Aizawa bought them.

"Oh my God!" Yamada screeches at one point, causing a few passersby to stare. "My favorite store is back open!"

Yagi and Izuku share a confused look, but Aizawa only sighs, seemingly used to it.

Quickly, though, Izuku finds out what Yamada is talking about, as then they're walking inside of a huge arts and crafts department store. Fabrics, pencils, markers, tapes, paints, sketchbooks, and even more things garner Izuku's attention upon walking inside.

He leaves his teachers' side immediately and goes toward the way back, eyeing the wall of colorful spray paints. Some of them are glittery, while others are matte. There's a large selection of pastel colors, and even more of neon, glow in the dark ones.

Oh, Izuku has been *itching* to get his hands on the glow in the dark ones. They're usually too expensive, but on the rare occasions he could have them, he would put his Rabbit markers all around the city as a reminder of where his territories were.

Everyone and their mothers could see his bright red calling symbol in the dead of night. It was a way to make civilians feel safe, and for villains to feel the opposite.

There are gas masks planted conveniently beside the wall of spray paints, making Izuku grin. It's like they're asking for graffiti to increase around the area.

Izuku looks at the prices and gleefully realizes that they're a lot cheaper here than at the other place he used to go to. If he ever gets to go out as Rabbit again, he'll have to remember to come back here. He needs to stock up again.

He leaves the spray paint wall and looks at all of the fabrics, eyes narrowing as he inspects the quality. The material Izuku used for his costume is in here, but it's a little more expensive than where he

always got it from. Surprisingly, he doesn't need any of the stuff he sees. Before, he would always make sure to have as much fabric as possible as backup to patch his suit up, but since his new costume is made out of *incredibly* fucking expensive shit that he took from Nezu's stash, there's no use buying anything from here.

He steps into another aisle and finds what he was most curious about —the charcoal and drawing pencils. He looks at all the different shades and thicknesses, mentally cataloging all the ones he doesn't have. He picks up the kneadable erasers and the shading stumps, wondering if it's worth it to get them. He's mostly self taught, save for a couple YouTube videos here and there and a book he snagged from the library (it was burnt up during the fire, he reckons), so he's not as familiar with how to use some of the new stuff artists have nowadays.

He just kinda has something in mind, uses whatever utensil he has closest to him, and draws it out. He loves visuals.

But Izuku hasn't had much time to do fun sketches lately. Maybe if he gets back into it, he might want to look at this stuff. But where would he start?

Izuku feels Yamada appear from around the corner, and when he glances at him, he sees that the man is holding a basket of a ton of paint tubes.

"See anything ya like?" Yamada asks, peering at the things Izuku is standing in front of. "Oh, that's a great brand to start with."

Izuku shrugs. "I don't really know what all this is, so I'm not too sure. What's the paint for?"

"I'm assigning a class project for my English Honors students to do as a midterm exam. I want them to use a lot of color, so I'm giving them the option of using paints, markers, or colored pencils."

Izuku raises his eyebrows. "That sounds fun."

"I thought so too! Hopefully they like it!" He winks at him. "Maybe I'll have you do it too to set an example."

Turning away, Izuku hides his face. Before he can answer, Yamada is moving forward.

"Do you like to paint, Midoriya?"

“I never have time to. I think I like to just sketch things out. Colors aren’t really my thing… unless it’s spray paint. I like it messy.”

Yamada laughs sharply. “I gotcha. Well, lemme tell ya something. There’s a secret little room on the top floor at UA where I keep all my art supplies. There’s a few canvases and papers there too. I’ll give you the key when we get home so you can use it whenever you like.”

What? How did Izuku not notice it before then? An art room? He has scoped that place like he was searching for buried treasure before. There’s no way he missed it!

At the idea that there’s another room to explore and take claim to, Izuku perks up. “Wait, really?”

“‘Course. I don’t really use it much at all anymore. If anyone is gonna put it to use, it should be you. Going in there helped me relax sometimes, so maybe it’ll do the same for you.”

Izuku’s entire stance brightens. “Thank you,” he says, giddy now.

The blond hero just swipes a few of the pencils on the shelf before Izuku and places it in the basket. “You can thank me by using up the stuff I got in there. I’d hate for it to just sit.”

With Yamada here encouraging him, giving him permission, Izuku thinks he definitely will get back into it now.

Your style is atrocious, Shimura says. *You desperately need new clothes.*

Izuku gasps. *Are you kidding me? You’re the one wearing yellow with white and black! They don’t go together!*

You need some color theory lessons, Ninth, En cuts in, making Izuku rear up mentally to defend himself.

You’re seriously talking when you wear a jean turtleneck? He claps back.

I’ve been saying the same thing for weeks, Shinomori agrees calmly.

Exactly! Izuku cheers. *Thank you! You’re the only person here who has any right to say anything. Your clothing was great!*

Banjou finally speaks up. *All of you need help.*

“Kiddo, did you hear me?” Yamada taps him on the shoulder. “You’ve got no choice this time, sadly. You really have to get some new clothes. You’ve been wearing nothing but hand me downs and things from the lost and found!”

He takes Izuku by the shoulders and steers him directly inside the clothing store. He pushes him in the direction of the boys’ section, not taking no for an answer.

“We’re not leaving ‘till you’ve got at least five more shorts and pants. A jacket, too, since you like to leave those hanging about.”

Izuku’s expression sours. “I have plenty of clothes.”

“You wear the same things over and over. You look like we fished you out of a dumpster half the time. No offense.”

Geez. Do people not realize that saying no offense after an insult doesn’t make it any less offensive? Even if he’s right, it still makes Izuku burn.

“We did fish him out of the trash,” Aizawa grumbles from beside them, making Yamada turn and slap his arm.

“And this goes for *you* too, mister! I’m sick of seeing you wear the same two sweaters and black shirts! Go get some actual good stuff while I supervise the little listener here!”

“Supervise?” Izuku echoes as Aizawa snorts and traipses away. “I don’t need supervision.”

Yamada gives him a sad, sad look. “For this? You really, truly do. If I leave you alone, I bet you’ll have picked five of the worst shirts in this entire store. I’ve already failed as the best fashion icon today by allowing you to wear what you are.”

Izuku crosses his arms. Now he’s wishing he followed Yagi when the man went to get another suit at the boutique. Anything’s better than being right here.

“What’s wrong with my outfit?” He asks, pouting a little.

Yamada just looks at him. His eyes go from Izuku’s neon galaxy socks to his black sweatpants, and then to his dark red t-shirt that has *eat*

bass, smoke grass, and sled fast on the front and back of it. His socks are over the sweatpants a little ways, and his shirt is tucked into his waistband. “Son,” he utters, defeated. “Do you have a set style yet?”

Izuku doesn’t say a word in reply. He just looks off into space, wondering what he means by that. Izuku doesn’t really have an aesthetic. Only as Rabbit does he care what he looks like. And that’s only because he wants to look cool (and also not get clowned online).

Yamada pats his head, and Izuku swears he fucking sees a singular tear making its way down his cheek. “You know what, don’t worry about that. We’ll find your style right now.”

Izuku doesn’t think he’s ever been in so much danger before. But if he’s being honest, he’s sort of looking forward to it.

“I don’t like it.”

Aizawa frowns. He was surprisingly the first between the two to get the clothes Yamada demanded. So now he’s helping Izuku meet his minimum amount as well. “Yes, you do. I can see it on your face. Why don’t you want it?”

“It’s kind of expensive,” Izuku says flippantly, already moving forward. He doesn’t want to talk to Aizawa right now, but he also doesn’t want to make a scene. Everything is still just so awkward.

“Kid, it’s four hundred yen.”

“Yeah, and that’s too much.”

“Four hundred.”

Izuku reddens. “I—my usual T-shirts cost even less!”

“What, the ones you find on the side of the road?”

“There’s nothing wrong with reused clothes!” Izuku snaps, voice getting louder as his defensiveness kicks in. “And you’re one to talk!”

Aizawa throws him an incredulous look before snatching a random

shirt off a neighboring rack and throwing it in the cart. “Okay, fine. I’m buying this one for you then.”

Izuku’s mouth drops open. “But that one’s even more! It’s twice as much!”

Aizawa fixes a glare on him, his teeth bared. “Then you shouldn’t have complained about the last one, huh?”

The boy reaches into the cart, about to take the shirt and put it back, when Aizawa slaps his hand away. “Touch it,” he warns, “and I’m buying you five more.”

Goosebumps rise on Izuku’s skin, and he’s not sure if it’s because of the decreasing temperature or because of his rising anger. “Do that and I’ll snap your fucking card in half so then *neither* of us can—”

Yamada comes around the corner with a bundle of even more clothes in his arms. He notices the situation instantly, and his face falls. “Oh, come on, guys, don’t fight! This is fun, right? Everything was going so well!”

“He’s being annoying,” Izuku mutters first, having to bite back a complaint when the voice hero drops the stuff in the cart.

This is getting to be *way* over the amount Yamada told Izuku to get. Does he not realize this? Does he care?

“Oh, I’m being annoying? You know what,” Shouta starts, grabbing the cart and walking directly to the register. “I won’t even bother.”

Izuku watches him stomp away, gut coiling. This is fucking bullshit. This isn’t right! They’re spending too much on him. Don’t they understand that? It feels wrong, them taking their hard-earned money and wasting it on him when he’s already okay with what he has now. He knows they’re rich, okay? He fucking knows that by now!

But it doesn’t matter! It’s the principle of it! Izuku doesn’t want the clothes because he knows he’ll never truly enjoy them with the knowledge of just how much they were!

As the man stalks off to pay for all the clothes, Yamada sighs again, shaking him from his inner monologue. “Midoriya. He just wants you to have everything you need, kiddo, that’s all.”

Izuku crosses his arms, hugging himself tightly. The light in the

shopping center is suddenly too bright and piercing. He feels a headache coming on, which is a telltale sign he's about to have one of his bouts. "I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful," he starts quietly, kicking at the floor. "But I—I don't need all of this. It's too much. I…"

He trails off, but Yamada waits. He's always been patient like that.

"I never had this much before, and I was just fine. I don't need it now. It's a waste to—"

Yamada takes a step so he's right in front of him, looking down at him. "Buying things for you is not a waste. And don't say you have enough things as it is, because you really don't. The fact is that most kids have a hell of a lot more than you do. You *deserve* to have more. It doesn't matter what you had in the past. So, let us do this for you, okay?" He takes Izuku's silence as a sign to continue. "Besides, clothes are essential. It's a need, not a want. With winter coming up, and the fact that you're growing, you need new stuff."

Izuku just nods, staring pointedly at the tiles on the floor. Arguing with Yamada is like arguing with a cactus.

Maybe it's difficult because he's nearly always right.

Just then, Yamada kneels down so Izuku has no choice but to look at him. It should make him feel stupid, or childish, or anything other than what he is, but somehow it doesn't. It just feels natural after so many times of Yamada doing it. "You know, Midoriya, Sho didn't have a lot of money as a child. His parents were a little, er, *crazy,* so his situation was tight." He pushes his glasses up to his nose, blond strands falling in his face. "Because of this, he gets a little intense when it comes to shopping for others. I know he's not always the best at showing it, but he really is trying to make sure you're alright. He doesn't want you to go through what he did. Not anymore. We have the resources to give you what you always should've had, so of course he's going to try and give you all he can."

Is that why he gave me the phone?

Really, it all sort of makes sense now. Izuku feels a bit dumb for not realizing it sooner. Guilt blooms in his chest and threatens to overwhelm him, and he bites the inside of his cheek to stop the bad feelings from overwhelming him. Instead, he focuses on all of the quirks and emotions he can feel coming from all the people currently in the mall. While before he dampened them so as not to be overwhelmed, now he's welcoming them.

Oblivious to this, Yamada takes him back to where Aizawa is now waiting for them at the entrance. He hands the large bags to Izuku wordlessly, already starting on another trek.

Izuku follows behind much slower, thoughts going back to a different time. Back to when the only time he'd have this much stuff in a bag at one time was when he'd be carrying home tech pieces from the Club, preparing to make one of his smoke bombs.

'You deserve to have more. It doesn't matter what you had in the past.'

Izuku frowns, thinking to himself that he actually really was happy enough with his bombs back then. He never felt angry about not having new clothes or the newest shit on the block. He was grateful for what he could scavenge, and maybe that's the problem.

Sometimes, as stupid as it is, Izuku forgets that not everyone was brought up the same way he was.

Chapter End Notes

more mall trip shenanigans to come, don't worry! this was only half.

also, all might is the superior dad and im tired of pretending like he's not. mic is a close second but let's be REAL and talk about who was with izuku the longest and cared about izuku for HIM, not rabbit!! and even when izuku's identity was revealed, all might's opinions didn't change one bit!! dadmight solos ur fav. we all need a dadmight.

n

art of noise

Chapter Notes

izuku has some strong feelings :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku hates places like Chuck E Cheese's.

There was always something unnerving about the rat mascot to him. It wasn't the eyes, surprisingly enough. It was something else. Maybe it was the fact that the modern version of the costume doesn't have a tail, or maybe it was because, most of the time, Izuku wouldn't sense any kind of quirk inside the suit.

It's weird, but Izuku can still tell the difference between a quirkless person and *nothing*.

He can still feel the remnants of quirk genes in quirkless people, likely due to the fact that their parents or other family members had quirks. Except whereas those with quirks feel full, quirkless people feel a little lighter somehow.

Izuku isn't sure how to describe it, but if he focuses hard enough, usually he can sense the dull buzz of any person's energy, quirk or not. Well, Aizawa was the only exception to that a while ago, for reasons he's still unsure of, but anyway!

Perhaps this is a mechanism Extract was built with in order to seek out potential suitors for quirks, which is kind of sad to think about, as only All for One can give quirks. Extract seems to have gotten that ability but not the means to act on it.

Since Izuku can still, in more ways than one now, sense a person even if they're without a quirk, it's pretty easy for him to tell if there's no human present.

How? Well, if there's just *nothing* there for him to sense.

So those few times that he went to Chuck E Cheese's after he manifested his quirk, back when he was still young and accompanying Kacchan and Auntie while his mother worked, he was always confused by the lack of a signal behind the costume.

It was *nothing.* Just radio silence from his quirk.

Even as the rat talked. Even as it waved and walked around and said hello.

It wasn't a quirkless person, as again he still would've been able to very faintly sense the hidden genes, so what was it?

It's a mystery Izuku has yet to solve. It makes him hate Chuck E Cheese's to this day.

He's certain the mascot isn't an animatronic. So it has to be something else. Something… otherworldly. But to be in every Chuck E Cheese location? Izuku has a conspiracy on his hands.

This is why arcades are a hit or miss with Izuku. It's a love-hate relationship.

He won't enter an arcade of any kind if they have a mascot. Izuku simply won't go in. He'll turn right back around.

Yagi sees him glaring through the windows of the brightly colored pizzeria style arcade room on the top floor of the mall. "Do you like arcade games, my boy?"

"Yeah," Izuku says. "Usually. I used to play against Kacchan a lot. I always won."

Yagi laughs goodnaturedly, but after a few seconds he frowns. "You know, you've mentioned a lot about Young Bakugou recently. Have you ever done anything fun with anyone else? Maybe another friend?"

Izuku turns and stares at him blankly. *I only had Kacchan,* he thinks, unimpressed. *You know that.*

Yagi must sense his mistake, as he rubs his neck and turns his face to the sky, where the ceiling opens up to allow the sunshine through. "Or just anyone in general? Not necessarily a friend."

At this, Izuku pauses. He knows what he's implying with that last part. He's probably talking about an adult. Maybe his mother. Or his father.

Any other time and maybe Izuku would've clammed up immediately, but this day has gone relatively great so far, so he's feeling… happy. Happier than he's been in a bit, he thinks. With his hands full of bags

and his heart feeling light, he doesn't mind talking.

He remembers, vaguely, one lucky morning when he was allowed to go with Kurogiri to get some supplies at the mall. Kuro always made sure to keep his quirk in check out in public so as not to draw attention. His purple clouds were mere ghostly shadows over his features. "Yeah," he eventually admits. "My… dad's friend. He took me places sometimes. He, uh, actually took me here when I was younger."

"Oh, yeah? Was he a good player?"

"I don't know." Izuku shrugs, staring at his reflection in the mirror and wondering if Kuro ever thinks about this. "He only ever watched me play. He never joined in."

"Ah," Yagi says, sounding even more awkward. "That's a shame."

For a moment, Izuku is lost in remembering. He was probably only like six or seven, and he was still fairly new to the facility and to Father. He was still trying to adapt and learn how to be who he truly was. One day, he was finally allowed to go out with Kuro on an errand, and he was told by Kuro that they were not to stray from their objectives. But Izuku was so excited to be at the mall, as he hadn't been there in months, that when they passed by the neon lights and sounds of other kids playing in the arcade, Izuku begged to go in.

And Kurogiri, after seeing the way Izuku stared at the other kids and their parents, relented.

"Fifteen minutes, young one," Kurogiri says, following closely behind Izuku when he squeals and proceeds to skip inside. "And then we leave. We mustn't be late."

But that fifteen minutes turned to thirty, and that to forty-five, and then that to an hour. Before they knew it, they'd been there for two hours, and Father was upset when they returned.

Izuku still feels guilty to this day about asking Kuro at all.

Yagi clears his throat then, and Izuku looks at him in the reflection of the window. "You know, if you ever need someone to accompany you to places, anywhere that is, I'd be glad to go. Or even if you just want a place to sleep over at. I'm sure that you're very happy over at Aizawa and Yamada's, of course! But, well, I'm sure things can get pretty hectic."

The hero glances behind him to where Aizawa and Yamada are looking at a large map of the mall. Izuku follows his gaze and winces, wondering if Yagi noticed the tension he has with Aizawa. He didn't think it was that noticeable, but maybe he's just a little ignorant. He should've known Yagi is always more observant than he lets on.

All Might smiles at him then, something soft lighting up his bony face. "So, you're always welcome over at my apartment, Midoriya. Doesn't matter what time. I don't want you to feel as though you're not."

Izuku stares into his genuine eyes, and the sadness that permeates the air from Yagi makes the boy want to frown. He doesn't like that feeling at all, much less from Yagi. And so Izuku forces a smile on his face, trying to put as much warmth behind his words as possible when he speaks. "Thanks, sensei."

He doesn't know when he's ever going to take up the offer, or if he even will at all, but it's nice to have the option. It's nice to know that Yagi wouldn't mind.

"Ooh, this place is always fun!" Yamada says, coming up behind them. "Do you want to play a few games, Midoriya? Maybe enough to get a prize!"

Izuku holds up his hands. "Oh, no no! I'm okay!"

"Are ya sure? I swear you said you loved arcades before. We could play paintball! They've got a course way in the back!"

"I know! I love playing, I do! I'm just…"

Yamada seems to get it rather quickly, though, as he throws his arms up in a *whatever* gesture. "Nah, it's alright. All good! Maybe we'll come back another time." He puts his hand up to cover his mouth when he whispers dramatically to Izuku. "Maybe when the others aren't with us, ya know? We'll dominate the entire arcade without them."

"I used to be a champ at air hockey back in the day." All Might butts in, looking thoughtful. "But that was decades ago."

Yamada recoils. "I keep forgetting you're ancient, dude. Geez."

Yagi sputters, and Aizawa, who is walking up to them, chuckles darkly.

“I’m not ancient!” Yagi defends. “I’m only, like, eighteen years older than you!”

“Only, he says, as if that’s not— *oof!”* Yamada cuts off when Yagi quickly karate chops his neck, sending the other blond to the floor.

Izuku slaps a hand over his mouth to try and hide his giggles, but the appalled look on Yama’s face as he gets back up makes it hard to contain it. He busts out laughing, and pretty soon everyone else is too. Even Aizawa is smiling beneath his scarf.

Izuku’s stomach hurts from the action, so he turns away and puts his hand on the wall to fix himself.

It looks like even All Might is insecure about his age.

Izuku can only guess why.

“I always found it weird how this mall has a whole grocery section,” Yagi comments, observing all of the produce stands and stores of cold foods.

“Since it’s so big,” Izuku says, “I guess it can have pretty much whatever it likes as long as it falls within procedural standards.”

“Sure, but I can’t imagine waking up one morning and thinking, *oh, I really need some lettuce! Off to the mall!* You know?”

Izuku smirks. “I’m sure flying heroes like to be able to just drop in from above, though. No entrance door necessary.”

Yagi side-eyes him. “I see that look. Don’t get any ideas.”

“What do you mean? I’m not a flying hero.”

“As if that would stop you.”

Izuku doesn’t have a response to that, as he’s not wrong at all.

He helps Yagi pick out some tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers, and bags them for him too.

When he walks toward Yamada, the man hums in question. “Hey, kiddo, I’ve been craving some muffins. What kind should we make in the morning?”

Izuku scans the various fruits and flavors in front of him. “Up to you. I love ‘em all.”

“Hm. What about lemon? Or raspberry? Ooh, maybe pumpkin!”

Pumpkin muffins, Shimura says, longing. *It’s been a while since I’ve had one of those. I hope you know that we can taste what you taste, too, Izuku.*

Izuku hides his smile at the hidden message. “Pumpkin sounds great,” he says aloud.

Toshi’s gonna have to fight to regain his spot as my favorite successor, kid.

As Yamada picks out the stuff he needs and Yagi talks with Aizawa about the special food he has to eat to accommodate himself, Izuku wanders a little.

It’s a good thing they found lockers to store their other bags for a while. They had to pay for them, which Izuku didn’t like, but Yagi took care of it. But at least now Izuku isn’t as heavy handed. He can put his hands in his pockets and look around without needing to use any of his enhancements.

He knows he’s not supposed to stray far, but he can’t help it. The moment he sees a bakery shop full of hero-themed cakes, cookies, and donuts, his feet just carry him there. It’s probably new, as Izuku doesn’t remember seeing it before.

This is as good a time as ever to check it out.

He’s handed a business card when he gets close, and also a small bag full of samples. Immediately, he’s hooked.

Free shit and he’s only just walked in? That’s a good sign. Izuku isn’t ever going to leave.

The woman at the counter gives him a warm smile as she wipes down the glass. “Hey, welcome to *Pros ‘n Pastries!* Need any help, just ask!”

“Thanks!”

The prices here aren’t too expensive, he notes happily. He wonders if Yamada would like to come in and see, since Izuku knows he’s got a

sweet tooth. They've got a lot of stuff for such a small shop. He reckons they sell out quickly.

Izuku spots a Midnight-themed Oreo cake and wishes he had his phone on him so he could take a picture and send it to her. She absolutely hates Oreos, so he wants to see her reaction.

It's really cute, though, he thinks.

Maybe Ms. Hanako will like it. He knows the old lady loves sweets, too. Which also reminds him that he hasn't seen her in a long time. He hasn't had the chance to go to her pizzeria.

He hopes she isn't worried about him. That would suck. He doesn't want her to be upset.

Izuku walks out of the store, about to walk to his teachers and give them some of the free samples to try, only to stop immediately when he steps out of the doorway.

There's an opening there. Directly in front of him.

Izuku doesn't know why he thinks it. Doesn't know why the thought pops into his mind at all and makes the connection, but it does.

Before him, in between the bustling crowds of people carrying bags and scrolling through their phones, is a clear line. No one walks through it, and it stays perfectly straight, almost as if it's been programmed as a no-walk zone. It's only big enough for someone like Izuku to run through.

It's like it's only for him to see.

It's a clear shot. It's the best chance he's ever gotten and possibly the only chance he'll get for a while to run and not be found.

To run. *Run.* Why is he running again? Right here, Izuku doesn't remember all the details. Why does he want to leave so badly? He's unsure.

He's sure he had a reason before, maybe a couple of weeks ago, but right this second? When they're just being one happy group and going to the mall of all places? He can't find it. Why would Izuku even think about running?

But still. It's been ten whole seconds now and the clear line is still

there. Waiting for him. Teasing him. Leading directly to a golden exit in the far distance.

Izuku chances a quick glance to the side of him. He spots his teachers ten or so yards away, unaware of his current predicament. Aizawa is shaking his head at all of the things Yamada is picking out from the clearance produce pile, and the blond hero himself is clutching a basket of goods in his hand, along with what looks like a bag of muffin mix.

Yagi is beside them, garnering their attention as he points to a black table of expensive melons.

They aren't *looking* at him. They don't see Izuku. It could happen in the snap of a finger.

The crowds are big. Izuku could slip through the cracks presented to him and they'd never be able to find him until he's already out of the store and far, far away. Izuku is good at running, however much he doesn't enjoy doing it sometimes. Even if he's seen, the massive throngs of people will make it near impossible for Aizawa to accurately use his capture weapon on him, and as fast and skilled as the man is, not even he would be able to catch up to a powered up Izuku if he were unable to erase his quirk in time.

Yamada's quirk is more harmful than beneficial here with so many innocent, vulnerable people around. It wouldn't do anything good.

All Might is a wild card, as he has strengths in nearly every category, but even he would have trouble picking Izuku out. And besides, would he risk transforming here? Izuku doesn't think so.

This truly is the best opportunity for him to leave.

Izuku would be back at the apartment quicker than you could say *Plus Ultra!* He'd have just enough time to grab his important stuff and say goodbye to the cats, and he could get to one of his abandoned safe houses to lay low for a bit. One of his safe houses that not even *Aizawa* knows about.

He knows people. Some of his clients owe him. He could hop from place to place so he'd never get caught.

He can't leave the country anymore, as he's sure the exits are being watched, but that's okay. That plan has long since been put on the back burner. There's still many places in Japan for Izuku to go.

It would be a sliver of freedom for Izuku. It would return him to how things used to be, back before he got himself fucking exploded.

There are hands on his shoulders. Soft ones. Not heavy. Izuku feels them, but something tells him they're not truly there.

A whisper of a breath sounds right beside his ear, and it sends shivers down his body. *Is that really freedom, Ninth?*

Izuku closes his eyes, feeling First's energy wreath around him until the vestige is standing right in front of him. He feels the presence—God, he's suffocating in it—but he doesn't want to look. Doesn't want to see him.

Running for the rest of your days will never allow you to accomplish what you want, the man continues, all soft and sad and kind.

Izuku leaving would break every last piece of what he's been slowly building. First is right. If he leaves now, he'll *truly* be on the run. He'll be running from all of the heroes, even Yamada and Aizawa this time. He won't be spared, at least not like all the other times. Hell, he thinks that maybe even All Might would go after him, too, which is just a scary thought.

Not only that, but *Midoriya Izuku* would be looked for as well. He'd be searched for by the government and the police, mostly since there's still the issue of legal guardianship. Tsukauchi would come looking for him. Izuku's face would be plastered everywhere.

Is that what he wants?

Remind yourself who you want to become, First—no, his name is Yoichi, Izuku knows him, he's *Yoichi*— says.

Izuku's fists clench. His breathing has slowed, and he can feel his muscles twitching to move.

This time, the voice comes from right in front of Izuku, outside of his body. *And think of what you're fighting for.*

Izuku sees cat-shaped pancakes and mismatched eyes. He thinks of the guilt he's felt oozing from Kacchan's skin every day for the past week now, and he winces at the reminder of the sorrow he's sensed from All Might. He remembers a soft hug after running away the second time around, and then a rough hand reaching out to him on a rooftop holding a sandwich.

Would he really be willing to risk all of that?

“I won’t disappear again,” Izuku tells Yamada, hands shaking as blood drips down his palms from nail-shaped crescents. “I promise.”

That’s right; he did say that. He promised them.

Izuku opens his eyes, and the opening is still there. It’s like it’s being kept open for him. Only for him. For just this second.

He would be gone so fast it’s not even funny. His fingers twitch with anticipation, and his quirks stir underneath his skin.

When Izuku looks back, Aizawa is staring right at him. His hands are in his pockets, and his face is half hidden in his capture weapon. He doesn’t have his quirk active or anything. He’s just watching Izuku through half-lidded eyes, looking tired.

He looks the epitome of casualness even though Izuku is sure the man knows damn well what he’s thinking about. Aizawa definitely realizes what Izuku is contemplating, if the way his eyes flit toward the opening has anything to say about it, and yet he doesn’t move. He blinks once, slowly, barely interested.

It looks… it almost looks like he would let Izuku go if he tried.

Izuku’s jaw sets. He looks back at the crowds, and the opening is still there. But then the world comes back into focus, and the tightness leaves his chest.

Maybe he really doesn’t want to be the one on the run anymore. It’s been tiring after all these years.

And they said they could protect him, didn’t they? That’s what *they* promised. And Yamada… he’s never broken a promise.

The doubt of his, that moment of contemplation, is gone a little slower than it came.

Izuku turns around and jogs back to where his teachers are standing, leaving the feeling of Yoichi far, far behind him.

He wants to see what flavor muffin mix Yamada bought for tomorrow’s breakfast.

They eat lunch at a burger joint. It's one that Izuku has only gone to once with Kacchan, as the blond always complained about how they didn't have orange soda.

Izuku likes orange soda, too, but he prefers grape. It's gotta be real fizzly, though. That's his only requirement. And this place has the best grape soda around!

They sit at a large, three-sided booth. Yagi gets one of the ends, as he needs his space, and Yamada and Aizawa share another end. Izuku is in the middle, as it's the smallest side. He can't complain, though, as he can clearly see both the entrances and exits to the store this way.

"The chocolate milkshake looks good," Yamada says, pointing to it on the menu.

"Every milkshake looks good to you," Aizawa replies.

"Because every milkshake is delicious."

Izuku runs a finger along a small crack on the side of the table. "Except peanut butter shakes." They all stare at him, confused, so Izuku elaborates. "I hate peanut butter."

Yagi nods. "I'm not a fan anymore either. It's hard to process. You know, I'm thinking about getting a milkshake too. I haven't had one in a while. What do you think I should get, my boy?"

Izuku leans in close. "You should get the strawberry milkshake."

The pro hero puts up the menu to hide both of their faces as he whispers to him, matching his energy. "Does this have anything to do with the fact that Aizawa hates strawberries?"

"Yes."

"We should both get one, then," Yagi says, sounding almost sinister.

And so, when the waiter comes around to ask what they want, Izuku and Yagi make sure to say their order loud and proud, ignoring Aizawa's unimpressed stare.

It's the little things, Izuku thinks, that make it all worth it.

Izuku wishes he could steal things again without getting lectured for it. He'll admit it, he misses the days where he could walk into a large, overpriced bookstore and snag something off the shelves without having to pay for it.

And before you judge him, he knows it was wrong. He knew it then, and he knows it now. He knows that just because he was stealing from a large store, one that's a part of a chain and not family-run, doesn't mean he also wasn't stealing money from the author of the books he took.

Some authors get royalty off of every book sold, while some are simply paid a flat rate for having a hundred or so copies available for sale at the store. Izuku tried to steal books that wouldn't mess things up for the author, but it's hard to always find that information out. So, a lot of times, Izuku wasn't just stealing from the store, he was stealing from the author.

That's why Izuku only ever stole books if he really needed them and couldn't find them online or at the library. Doesn't change the fact that he did it, though.

But here, Izuku finds himself wishing he had the opportunity to steal again.

He doesn't care about author royalties or whatever. Not with this specific book he's looking at: *Eliminating the Giftless; An Overview of the Unwanted.*

Izuku has seen this book before, and it's nothing but nonsense about how quirkless people and those with mutant features are nothing but a stain on society that would be better off being lumped together in a place far, far away to eventually die off. Even 'villainous' and mental quirks are stabbed at, which annoys Izuku just thinking about it.

He's not sure why or how this book even made it past an editor.

Izuku wants to steal the book, deface it, and then mail it directly to the author as an anonymous threat. Hell, he'd even make it not anonymous, he doesn't care.

Some people just don't deserve the platform they have.

"You shouldn't upset yourself by looking at those sorts of things," Yagi says from beside Izuku, sounding grim. His face is pinched as he stares at the book in Izuku's hand. "My team at my agency warned me of that author. Did you know he wanted to set up an appointment with me a while ago for an interview? He wanted to ask all about my *perfect* quirk, as he called it. He wanted to include the interview in the book."

Izuku's nose wrinkles. "If it's an interview he wants, I'd be glad to give him one. It just might not go the way he'd expect."

Yagi chuckles. "I bet it wouldn't. But, as fun as that sounds, I'd rather not have to pick you up from jail when it's done."

"I am an astounding citizen, actually. I would never hurt him." Izuku's voice turns lower. "Even though he'd deserve it."

"Did you find anything you want?" Yagi asks, changing the subject.

Izuku lifts up his shoulder. "Not this time."

"That's fine! Did you maybe want to go to that candle place over there, then? Aizawa and Yamada went to get some things at the hero supply store, so we can go without them for a bit."

At the mention of candles, Izuku becomes a lot more interested. "Yeah! I love candles! It helps stop the urge to burn down buildings."

Yagi sighs, covering his face when a few bystanders give them judgmental looks. "Please stop saying things like that aloud, my boy. One of these days someone will actually call the police."

"I think people should learn to just mind their own business."

"It's hard for anyone to ignore you, Young Midoriya."

Izuku's eyes narrow. "Something tells me that wasn't a compliment."

Yagi doesn't answer, as they're then walking inside the candle store. Immediately, Izuku is hit with a ton of scents and smells of body mists.

“Yamada likes to burn that one right there,” Izuku says, pointing to a big candle on the sales table. “It’s on clearance!”

“Winter berries? That’s a nice smell.” Yagi picks it up. “Would you like it?”

“Me?” Izuku asks.

Yagi looks around, as if wondering who else Izuku thinks he could be asking. “Yes?”

“No, thanks! I don’t need any more candles.”

“I didn’t ask if you needed it, my boy.” Yagi laughs brightly. “If you don’t like this one, then pick another. You can never have enough candles.”

“Well, which flavor is *your* favorite?”

Yagi doesn’t blink at the word choice. “Hm. I can’t say I have one.”

Izuku shakes his head. “You’re lying.”

Yagi blanches, looking scandalized at the abrupt accusation. “Eh?”

“Mhm. You’re a liar.”

“Wha—why do you say that?”

“Everyone has a favorite. It’s a law.”

“A law?”

Izuku breaks away from his side and picks up a big, thick blue candle. “Yep. It just passed. How about this one? *Sea breeze.”*

Yagi gives Izuku another one of his concerned looks before bending over to smell it. He recoils immediately, hand slapping over his mouth. *“Oh,* definitely not that one. Eesh!”

Izuku frowns down at the candle when he puts it back. “Do you prefer fruit, flowers, or more earthy scents?”

“Uh, it doesn’t really matter to—”

“Remember the law, sir.”

Yagi sighs. “I guess I like earth scents… or whatever that means.”

Izuku sniffs at him. “Typical.”

“Hey,” Yagi says, offended, but Izuku is already on the other side of the store, beckoning him over. He’s on a mission now.

Izuku holds up a dark purple one towards him. “What about *Moonlit Path?”*

Yagi reluctantly takes a whiff, but he doesn’t look too fond of this one either. “Far too strong. I can’t handle ones that are too overwhelming, you know.”

“Okay! Got it.” Calculating the new information, Izuku goes for one on the very top shelf now, having to climb Yagi like a tree to reach it despite his protests.

“Woah, be *careful!”* Yagi plucks Izuku, who’s now carefully holding a small glass jar, off of him. “My boy, I’m not going to sit here and smell each candle. I was under the impression *you’d* want one. We’re not here for me.”

“I’ll get one if you do,” Izuku offers, holding his gaze with a blank expression.

Yagi stares at him, as if to check if he’s kidding, but then he seems to deflate even more. He sets Izuku on the ground and then sniffs the *Pine Needles* Izuku is holding.

“Is that one good?” Izuku asks.

“It’s not bad, but it’s not quite good either,” Yagi admits with a thoughtful hand on his chin.

“So we’re getting closer!”

“I believe so.”

Izuku shoves another one under the man’s nose. “What about *Log Cabin?”*

Yagi moves his head away. “Who names a candle after a cabin?”

“Dunno. Smell it!”

Yagi does, and he gently pushes it away right afterwards. “That

doesn't smell anything like a log cabin."

Now Izuku is upset on the manufacturer's behalf. "How would you know? I bet you've never been in one!"

"And you have?"

"I used to live in one, thank you! Right outside the city in the forest. I put it together myself." Izuku pauses. "I lived in it for a month until some other homeless people burnt it down because they thought I was part of a gang."

Yagi is silent, momentarily at a loss for words. And then: "What?"

But Izuku is already off again, asking the worker if she has a scent called *Petrichor,* or anything close to it.

Izuku is sure Yagi will like this one.

"Do you want me to carry that for you?" Yagi asks, eyeing Izuku's bag, which holds two medium-sized candles. "It looks awfully heavy."

"It's not heavy for me! I used to drag whole refrigerators, remember?"

"If you say so."

Izuku points to a pickle store. "We should go there next, Yagi. It's one of my favorite stores!"

"Pickles? I didn't know you liked pickles, my boy."

"I love pickles! They sell all kinds there. Auntie loves the fried ones."

Yagi brightens up. "Maybe we should get her some, then!"

Masaru likes spicy dill chips, so maybe we could get some of those, too. They're not too expensive, so I don't think All Might will mind.

"Speaking of," Yagi continues, "when do you think you three will be having dinner at their house?"

Izuku tips his head. “Dinner?”

“Yes. Yamada mentioned that you all could possibly visit the Bakugous for a meal. I mean, you are pretty close with them, right? A dinner would be polite, given the new circumstances.”

New circumstances? Izuku feels that itchy sensation start up inside him again. “What circumstances?”

Yagi pauses too, and he turns to give Izuku an awkward look. “Well, you’re living with Yamada and Aizawa for the time being. And you *are* under the school’s legal guardianship. You weren’t… planning on lying to Bakugou’s mother forever about that, were you? About your father?”

Lying? Izuku never really thought of it like that. With everyone else, yeah, sure, he was lying. But with Auntie? And Masaru? He kept them in the dark because he had no choice. If he told them he was homeless in the first place… there’s no telling what All for One would’ve done. The entire Bakugou family would’ve been wiped out, and Izuku would've been the one covered in their blood.

He wasn’t lying to them. He was leaving out details. He was telling them things that would save them from continuing to push and search.

He was stopping them from signing their own death warrants. He had no choice!

“And I reckon that eventually she may find out anyway, so isn’t it best to tell her yourself, my boy?”

Izuku *knows* that. Logically, Auntie and Masaru will find out eventually, as the courts and police are actively looking for his father, and also because Izuku is under the legal protection of other people now. But there was still some part of himself that wanted to keep them in the dark for a little while longer.

And the way All Might is talking makes it sound like Izuku himself would have to be the one to admit to it all. To the lying, to the—the ‘neglect,’ or whatever they call it, to the homelessness.

And he can’t do that. He doesn’t have that capability to look Auntie in the eye and admit it.

He can already imagine her face. He can feel the disappointment, the

sadness, and, god, it's enough to have him quaking. She asked him so many times if he was okay, she offered every single time he came over if he needed a place to stay, and he always said the same thing in response. He always brushed her off. He always smiled and laughed and went about his way.

He doesn't want to say anything different to her, as he knows she'd be angry with herself if she knew.

Or maybe she's always had suspicions and just never had a way to act on them.

"Hey, why don't we go take a seat?" Yagi cuts through the fog, and there's something about the way he says it, with that panicked edge to the words, that makes Izuku snap to his senses. "I shouldn't have said anything at all, Midoriya. I'm—"

"Deku?"

Are you kidding me? Can this day get any worse for him? Actually, he doesn't want the universe to answer that.

Izuku freezes, shoulders coming up to his ears as he processes the voice and the quirks coming up quickly behind him. Shit.

Fuck! This is a mall. Teenagers come to this mall all the time. He thought of the possibility of running into classmates here, but in all honesty he didn't care too much. He figured he could just avoid them as much as possible.

Here, though, he was distracted yet again. And *they* found *him.*

It's too late to play dumb, as they've already seen him. Izuku is one hundred percent fucked.

Izuku's wide, panicked eyes meet Yagi's for a second before he turns around, plastering a small, nervous smile on his face.

Uraraka, Asui, Ashido, and Hagakure stare back at him, all with various looks on their faces. They're each carrying a few bags except Uraraka, who is also the only one not smiling.

No, she's not even looking at Izuku anymore. She's staring behind him, right at Yagi.

"Hi, *kero,"* Asui greets, putting a finger to her mouth.

“Midoriya!” Ashido squeals, bouncing forward and nearly sending Izuku to the ground when she hugs him tight. “Didn’t think we’d be seeing ya here! Uraraka said you told her you’d be busy!”

Izuku’s cheeks burst into flame, not wanting to make it seem like he was lying. He gives Uraraka a nervous glance, pushing his hands out in front of himself. “Oh, yeah! I’m—I’m busy, yeah! I’m actually—”

“Nevermind that, Mido!” Hagakure interrupts, her gloved fingers pointing at Yagi. “Who did you come with?”

Yeah, this is it. Izuku’s heart may just burst. He’s going to break down. He wants to curl up into a ball and make a home under the floor. He’ll become a dirt bug. Maybe then Yamada will actually hate him!

Yagi moves from behind Izuku, and he’s red all over too. His large, bony hand finds the nape of his neck, where he rubs anxiously. “Uh, hello! I’m… I’m—”

He looks to Izuku for help, and the boy wishes he didn’t, wishes the man could’ve just made something up on the spot, because *come on,* he’s a pro hero for fuck’s sake! He’s supposed to be an excellent liar!

What is Izuku supposed to say? He obviously can’t tell them that this is All Might, as that would not only reveal Yagi’s secret but also make them both look weird (what kind of teacher takes their student on a mall trip during the weekend?), so what else is there to say? They probably won’t believe it if Izuku just said he’s a friend, as Yagi is much, much older, and if he called him a neighbor it would raise more questions than answer them!

They really should’ve come up with a cover story before this, huh? Now they’re screwed!

So, with this thought in mind, Izuku opens up his mouth, and the world is doomed.

“Guys, meet—meet my dad!”

The nervous shout rips out of him, and it’s quick and loud. It hurts Izuku’s throat, and it makes people turn their heads as they pass by. Izuku isn’t sure why he said it, isn’t sure why he even thought of it, but the damage is done.

Dad. He said dad. As in… dad. Not *Father.*

Oh, kid, Shimura says in sympathy, but Izuku doesn't want to hear her right now. He doesn't want to hear anyone! Yagi makes a strangled noise but otherwise doesn't react to the declaration, thankfully.

"That's your dad, Midoriya?" Ashido asks, obviously skeptical. She stares at Yagi for a second, mouth dropping open. "He's huge!"

Yagi chokes, having to quickly turn around to hide the blood that spews from his lips.

"Yeah, *kero,"* Asui agrees. "I don't see it."

"Woah," Hagakure says, mindblown. She pokes at Yagi's side, not caring at all for formalities. "He's so tall, and you're so… not."

Oh my God.

"I'm not done growing," Izuku defends himself weakly.

"Deku?" Uraraka says, and her shining brown eyes are on him now. Her face is pinched, and her brows are furrowed in worry. Her concern nearly makes Izuku sick with the intensity of it. "I thought your dad was away on a business trip again?"

Izuku gulps, guilt exploding inside him. "He, uh, surprised me! He finally got a break and decided to fly back over after hearing about, er, Hosu. Right, Y—Dad?"

The title feels wrong on his tongue, and it makes Izuku nauseous. He can't look Yagi in the eye as he talks, but luckily the pro hero seems to have put his act together.

"That's right!" Yagi smiles again, all charisma. He straightens up and puts a hand on Izuku's shoulder, extending his other one in a handshake to the girls in front of him. "I've been swamped with work, but I was finally approved for a vacation! It's lovely to meet you all. My boy here has told me a lot about you."

Izuku winces, recognizing the mistake and hoping the others won't notice it. Uraraka most definitely will sense the issue, but the others probably won't.

"Hello, sir! Nice to meet you too!" Ashido bows a little before accepting Yagi's handshake, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm Mina! Midoriya hasn't told us much about you, honestly, but it's still cool to finally see ya!"

Asui elbows Ashido in the side, as if to stop her from saying anything else that's possibly incriminating. "I'm Tsu, *ribbit.*"

Hagakure snatches Yagi's hand next. "Heya, Mr. Midoriya! Say, you do look kinda familiar now that I'm thinking about it."

Izuku is so caught up on the *Mr. Midoriya* thing that he barely registers his classmate's last sentence. Yagi does, though, as he stiffens immediately, but only by a fraction.

"Yeah," Ashido says, humming. "I swear I've seen someone like you at our school."

Well, fuck. Izuku's Grade A intelligence strikes again. They're about to get found out, aren't they? They're going to get caught in a lie!

Izuku's heart has just about stopped by the time Uraraka finally speaks. She's been ignoring Yagi's hand for the entirety of the conversation and has been giving Izuku an *are you okay?* look since the moment he revealed Yagi was his father. "We don't want to interrupt you," she says, voice surprisingly sweet. "So we'll leave you two to it! I hope you have fun."

It's the pointed way she says the words that clues Izuku in that she's trying to help him out for whatever reason. Yep, she has definitely sensed Izuku's tension by now.

"Oh, yeah, you're right! It's a private thing, huh?" Ashido goes in for another quick squeeze, throwing her arms around Izuku's neck in a hug, before turning away and grabbing Asui and Hagakure's arms. "Come on, we should go get a snack! Bye bye, Mido! And bye Mido's dad!"

Izuku flushes once more, waving goodbye to them awkwardly.

And then it's just Uraraka in front of him. She grabs his hand, and her palm is warm. Izuku focuses on the feeling of the raised bumps on her fingertips given to her by her quirk, and he stares into her intense eyes. They're dark, and they demand his attention. "Call me later?" She asks, not sparing Yagi a glance.

Izuku swallows. "Yeah."

Uraraka nods, relieved, and gives his hand what's probably meant to be a comforting squeeze before letting go. She runs to catch up with her friends, but not before sending a thinly hidden glare at Yagi. Izuku

tries to release some of the tension in his chest, but the bad feeling remains.

Izuku is glad he has a friend as observant and caring as Uraraka, but this time it may cause more problems than anything good. The thing is, Izuku hasn't exactly made it a secret that he doesn't have the best relationship with his father. Uraraka, Iida, and Todoroki all know this, as he's mentioned to them before that his father is on a lot of business trips and never has time to come see him, but he should've remembered that Uraraka—out of all three of them—seemed the most upset about it. She was adamant that Izuku's father could be more active in his life if he truly wanted to, and she maintained that Izuku shouldn't feel guilty about being upset over it. She said it's wrong of Hisashi to treat Izuku like that, and that he shouldn't just accept it.

So, really, Izuku accidentally made Uraraka hate his father even before meeting him. Which, in hindsight, probably wasn't the best idea. Sure, everyone should hate his *actual* father, but the new father he just came up with? Yeah, no. Izuku would rather proudly show off Yagi as his dad than ever admit to All for One being his father.

It's no wonder that seeing Izuku's supposed father so out of the blue here would cause Uraraka to become frazzled.

I really need to come up with better covers on the spot… I hate lying to them so much.

Izuku watches them disappear from view, and he tracks their quirks until he can barely feel them anymore. He should keep a better watch on his surroundings now to prevent those sorts of things from happening again.

Izuku blinks rapidly to get rid of the way his eyes start to burn due to the dryness in the air, and he turns toward the pickle store. He wants to forget this just happened yet knows it would be impossible. That's just not the type of person he is. He's always worried about things more than anyone should.

"Midoriya, are you okay?"

Izuku starts, taking an instinctive step away from Yagi, who is leaning down to speak to him quietly. His face is shadowed, making his blue eyes glow even brighter.

"I'm sorry," Izuku says, head bowing. "I—I shouldn't have made you do that. That was—wasn't right. It was—that was probably really

uncomfortable for you."

Yagi shakes his head quickly. "No! It was okay, Midoriya. I—I didn't mind it, honestly." He pauses. "I *don't* mind it."

Izuku doesn't believe it. "I shouldn't ask you to lie to them. They're your students."

The man takes Izuku's shaking fists and uncurls them, stopping his nails from digging into the skin again. "It's not like you expected them to be here. And it's not like we could tell them about my quirk. Really, there was no other option at the moment." He smiles a little. "You probably could have said I was anybody else, someone I could have done a better job of acting as, but that's alright. We can't do anything about it now. And as I said, I don't mind it at all."

"But what if they see you at school now? They already said you were familiar. And Uraraka already *kinda* sorta hates you because I told her I don't have the best relationship with my dad, so I don't want you to be treated badly either because of what I've already said and—"

"Hey, hey, don't worry about it. We'll figure something out!" Yagi straightens up, putting his hands on his hips. "This isn't a big deal! For now we should just keep enjoying ourselves, yes? It's a beautiful, warm day out."

Izuku wipes his nose. "I thought you said it was cold."

"I never get cold," Yagi reminds, almost proudly. "My metabolism works even quicker than yours. I store a lot of body heat, even in this form."

"Uh-huh." Izuku crosses his arms, letting Yagi take his bags from his hands. He spots a sign to his left and makes for it, needing to calm the awful feeling under his skin. "Uh, I—I need to use the bathroom, sir. I'll be back."

"You—"

Izuku ignores the rest of his mentor's sentence as he stumbles away, entire mind buzzing. He runs into a few people on the way to the hallway, and he utters quick apologies under his breath in response to their annoyed calls.

Thankfully, there's no one else in the bathroom when he bursts in. It's secluded, so he picks the stall in the farthest corner away from the

door to hide in. His chest just feels too tight, and he can't think for shit anymore. He's not sure why this is happening now, of all times, but the stress of the prior events, coupled with the anger and pain he's been feeling for the past few weeks, is making him sick to his stomach again.

He leans over the toilet just as the first dry heave hits him, trying hard to not put his hands on anything anyone else might have touched. He doesn't know how clean the mall keeps the bathrooms, and he's not about to get himself some unknown disease by touching up on everything in here.

As his body tries hard to throw up the cheeseburgers and delicious smoothie he ate during lunch, Izuku keeps the bathroom to himself. For a good ten minutes, there's only Izuku on his knees before the toilet, an intense, ugly cloud of emotions swirling around in the air, and the sound of sweet instrumental music coming from overhead.

Izuku likes the piano music he hears. It's soothing.

When he's calmed down enough to the point where he doesn't feel as nauseous, Izuku puts down the seat lid and sits on it, bringing his knees up to his chest. He presses his forehead to his sweatpants, his sweat soaking into the fabric.

This isn't healthy, kid, Banjou says, and for once there's not an ounce of humor in his voice.

"I know. But it's just me."

Shimura doesn't take this as an acceptable answer. *You need to tell someone about these spells you're having. Your medication helps the symptoms for your other issues, but this is something different. You need to nip this in the bud now before it grows to be something worse.*

What does she expect him to do? Izuku has already thought this over on nights where he couldn't sleep. Doesn't she know that?

"What exactly am I supposed to tell them? If I say what's happening, they—they'll just send me away to get studies done. And they won't find anything to begin with."

You don't know that, En pipes up, surprising him. *You're better than this. Shape up, Ninth. You won't be able to continue on for much longer if you choose to stay like this. Be smarter.*

Izuku huffs and buries his head even further into his pants. He has a raging headache now, and it's putting some kind of neon film over his surroundings. Everything is in high definition. It's too bright! It's making him want to rip out his own eyeballs just so he can replace them with something else.

He figures the vestiges are right, in some way, and he appreciates their brutal honesty, but things are just going way too fast yet not fast enough for him. He wishes he had the ability to control time. He wants to be able to stop the earth from spinning for ten minutes, and also to speed it up for however long he likes.

Is that so much to ask for?

The door to the bathroom opens, and Izuku bites back a sigh. Black boots enter his vision, and Izuku follows them with his eyes as they walk from the entrance and stop outside his stall.

"Kid," Aizawa begins, making Izuku roll his eyes to himself. "You fall in?"

"Go away."

The underground hero makes a negative noise, not fazed at all by the warning tone. "I don't think I should."

"Can a boy not shit in peace around here?"

This elicits a snort from him. "No." When it's clear Izuku isn't going to speak, Aizawa continues. "You should know that Yagi is worried about you. He told me what happened."

"That's great. Want a gold star for being fucking nosy?"

Aizawa moves back, leaning against the sink counter with one ankle crossed over the other. Izuku glares at the tile, suddenly annoyed by the fact that he can't see Aizawa's reaction. "You know, Mic's parents used to wash out his mouth whenever he cussed. If you're not careful, he might do the same to you."

Izuku can't hold back his scoff this time. The obvious empty threat does nothing but make his headache worse. "That wouldn't work on me. I used to eat soap whenever I was hungry as a kid, so it wouldn't do anything but clean my insides."

"There are a lot of things wrong with what you just said. I hope you

know that."

Izuku laughs at the abruptness of the last phrase, and he's surprised to find that it's all genuine. The next two minutes pass by in silence, and Izuku spends that time trying to put himself together. Aizawa doesn't say anything, but he stands there by the counter, just waiting. He doesn't leave Izuku for a second.

The boy slaps his cheeks to put away his emotions before unlocking the stall door. He doesn't see Aizawa's eyes when he goes for the sink to splash his face. In fact, he resolutely doesn't look at Aizawa at all, much preferring to act as if he doesn't exist for the time being.

He wipes his wet face on his shirt and then smooths his clothing down with his hands. He *tries* at least to look presentable sometimes, thanks. Sometimes the comments on his appearance do get to him. He just doesn't always show it outwardly.

Izuku sniffs and shakily walks toward the exit, doing a mental check to make sure none of his classmates are close by. The only thing worse than being seen with his supposed father is being seen with a teacher. *That* would admittedly be much harder to explain.

Aizawa follows behind him, but not too close. He makes sure to keep a minimum of a five foot distance away.

When they reach the end of the hallway, though, Izuku pauses. To their right is a bench holding what Izuku assumes is all of Aizawa's bags and drinks. He must've set it all down before entering the bathroom.

Izuku looks out into the crowds, looking at all of the stores they have yet to go into. His previous enthusiasm and excitement is all gone, though. His energy has been drained, just like that, and his good vibes are ruined. Everything feels off now, like a record player starting off at the wrong time.

"They went off without us," Aizawa explains. "But we can catch up to them."

At the mere idea of having to play catch up, Izuku's face crumples. If he's being honest, he's not in the mood for any of this anymore. The different emotions and powers swirling all around him make him feel like he's been caught up in the middle of a hurricane. None of it is fun now.

Aizawa doesn't even glance at him when he speaks. "Do you want to go?"

Do you want to leave, is what he means.

Izuku shakes his head. "They're still shopping. And Yagi is—they're both having fun. I don't want to ruin that."

Aizawa thinks for a second before nodding. "Okay. We can wait for them in the car. We might as well get a start on putting all of these bags in the trunk."

With these words, Aizawa hands Izuku a bunch of bags and then a mango smoothie. Izuku blinks at it, watching the condensation slide down onto his palm, and he notices that Aizawa has a matching one in his own hand. Huh. He must've just bought them before going after Izuku.

"Let's go," Aizawa says, gesturing to the escalators leading to the nearest exit.

And so Izuku wipes his face one last time and follows with his smoothie in hand.

Chapter End Notes

i am Unwell

also i rlly like the song black sea - natasha blume. i was listening to it while writing izuku's reactions to the messages he got next chap, and also while writing some future vicious scenes between him and a certain audacious pro hero :D

e

esoteric

Chapter Notes

> happy late thanksgiving to all those who celebrate :) i hope you all ate a shit ton

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things can always get worse. Izuku should've known that.

He cursed himself back inside the mall. He really does deserve this, now that he's thinking about it. He was having such a great time doing funky little things with his teachers, for once actually enjoying himself despite spending money, so it's only right that the universe reminded him of his place.

It's always two steps forward and one step back. But, mathematically, that's still going somewhere, albeit slowly, so Izuku is trying hard to keep his composure.

This is just another fork in the road. This is fine. This is just fine. We can fix this. Izuku repeats these reassurances to himself even as he doesn't quite believe them. His thumb shakes and slides over the pristine glass of his phone as he reads through the messages Dragon Lady left him. The first one was early this morning, actually around ten minutes after Izuku entered the mall and left his phone behind.

Go figure, right?

The first text reads: **hawks got to the doctor.**

Now, Izuku appreciates bluntness, usually. But this singular message, these five words, almost make him descend into another one of his meltdowns. Hell, the first word alone is enough to have his breath leaving him! Could she have been at least a little more specific? Maybe added in a reassurance there so Izuku wouldn't be on the verge of absolutely losing his shit?

The rest of Dragon Lady's messages tell Izuku the basic details of the attack, what happened, and when. They're interspersed between then and now, with the texts growing more and more concerned and frequent as time passed. Izuku's silence greatly worried her, it seems.

Izuku would be touched if not for the circumstances. He knew she had

a heart somewhere deep down. She just always hid it.

His clients texted him, too, though most of them were far more clinical. They were doing nothing but giving their reports of the situation to their Champion.

And as that Champion, Izuku doesn't think he's ever felt like more of a failure than right now.

He has four missed calls from Dragon Lady. The number glares at him through the fast growing fog hanging heavy in the air. Izuku steps back, away from the open trunk of the car.

"I need a minute," he says breathlessly, and he's not really asking so much as he is warning Aizawa. "Just a minute."

He turns and leaves his teacher, who's still organizing and putting the rest of the bags away, now without Izuku's help. "Kid, wait a second. I know—"

"I won't go far."

With that, Izuku stalks to the other end of the line of cars in the parking lot, trying to put as much distance between himself and Aizawa as possible without starting a fight. He doesn't want the man to hear any of this.

When he calls, Dragon Lady picks up immediately. He's barely managed to get her name out of his mouth by the time she's speaking over him. *"Did you take Faux for a walk?"*

Izuku paces in a circle, eyes darting around. The code words are enough to have his heart rate spiking even more. What she's really doing is trying to test if this is really him. When swapping important information or talking about personal identifiers, they always do this with each other. Due to their high profiles, it's a need.

"Yesterday at noon," Izuku answers, reciting the words they agreed upon. "Right after lunch. He really does need to lose some weight, you know. I've never seen a corgi so big—"

"Shit, kid." There's shuffling over the phone, and Izuku waits for her to leave whatever room she's in. *"Where have you been?"*

Izuku swipes a hand down his face. He's shaking so hard and sweating so badly that the phone nearly slips from his grasp. "Look, I'm—I'm

really sorry, Kaida. I left my phone behind while I was away. It's so stupid, and I'm sorry I missed everything. Is—Is everyone okay? How are you? And Doc?"

"Everyone's fine. The doctor is about as well as he's always been. He's tight lipped about what happened, but that's not new. And I got there as soon as I received the alerts, so I wasn't involved in the first attack. I only saw Hawks on his way out."

Izuku deflates. "Okay. That's—okay. I'm glad you weren't hurt."

"You need to be more careful, Rabbit. You didn't answer any of us for hours, so I thought he took you."

Took me? Izuku's heart drops at the mere thought of it. Here he was at the mall having a grand time while his champion partner was out doing his job for him and worrying that Hawks went after him.

"I was about to initiate a search for your dumbass, " Dragon Lady continues, and it may just be Izuku's high anxiety making him delusional, but he swears he hears her voice shudder. *"I half expected to see you dead on the news. Or worse, being hauled off to Tartarus."*

The guilt nearly sweeps Izuku off of his feet. "I'm sorry. I—I never thought he'd go this far. I didn't think he'd risk damaging the relationship between the Club and the Commission. It's already so fragile as it is. I should've been there. Maybe I could—could've stopped it. Or derailed him. I'm really sorry."

"None of us thought he'd be so ballsy. Not even I saw this coming, and I thought I knew him for a while. You can't be blamed for this."

Izuku shakes his head, his nerves lighting a fire inside him. The chilliness in the air makes him pace faster. "Yes, I can. And I should be." He doesn't wait for her response to that. "What did he want?"

There's a pregnant pause, and then: *"You, kid."*

His eyes squeeze shut. "Is that what he said?"

"He didn't have to. He was there for the doctor. He went inside after taking out the scouts and headed straight for him. Apparently he's been at the other locations searching for him. If only we'd been warned of that sooner..." Her words turn agitated at the end, no doubt at the fact the Board decided not to inform her of the situations at the other locations. *"He asked him a shit ton of questions. Doc said it was all about*

you.”

“What exactly did he ask?”

“Doc wouldn’t tell me.”

“Fuck.” Izuku bends over with one hand on his knee. His stomach is threatening to turn inside out again. He really doesn’t want to throw up out here, as that’s just embarrassing. He presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth, breathing in and out through the nose to stop the nasty feeling.

“Hey.”

“You don’t think he did it, do you? Told Hawks?”

“You’re asking if the Doc gave up your info?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know.”

For a second, Izuku pulls the phone away from his ear, vision going gray with panic. His breaths come out even faster, ruining his previous attempts at calming down. “He did. I bet he did.”

“You trust him that little ?”

Izuku scoffs. “Doc’s never agreed with what I’ve been doing. You know that he was my pediatrician when I was still with my piece of shit father. He’d tell anyone my confidential information if he thought they could use it. If he thought that they’d… if they’d… help.” Izuku’s eyes widen in realization, and his grip tightens so hard on the phone he thinks he hears a crack. “Hawks would only go to him for one thing.”

“Your medication, ” Dragon Lady says, already on the case. *“He had one of your prescriptions in his pocket. I saw it.”* Her voice gets slightly lower. *“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me how he got that.”*

Izuku straightens up, fixating on a squirrel running up a tree in the distance. “Fuck.”

“You’ve said that a lot.”

“He’s trying to find out why I take those pills. He’s gonna snitch on me.” Izuku feels a touch of amusement bubble up. “I’m gonna hurt

him. I'm gonna burn off those stupid fucking wings. I'm—oh, *hah."*

"Rabbit."

"How many did he injure?"

"That isn't—"

"Kaida, please. He was there for *me,* and I wasn't there, so it's my right to know."

She huffs. *"If you don't count the ones he knocked out with his feathers, just two. If you do, it's around a hundred."*

Izuku falls onto the curb, and the pain from his tailbone hitting the concrete makes him grit his teeth. The wind picks up, and he stares hard at the cracked asphalt below him.

There's a storm on the way again. Izuku feels it in his bones.

"But as I said, they're all fine," he hears from the speaker. *"A little bruised up with their egos taken down a notch, but other than that it was just another day for them."*

He doesn't answer immediately. He's too busy thinking, so Dragon Lady speaks again.

"Are you able to get here?"

"No."

"Kid, you know I hate asking this of you, but we really do need you over here. The board wants to speak with you."

"Look, Kaida, I'm…" Izuku grips the curly ends of his hair, pulling them so that he can feel the tension on his scalp. The sting is delicious, and it helps him focus a little more. "I'm still with Eraser. After Hosu… he hasn't let me do much of anything. I'm sorry."

Izuku hates having to admit this. He feels so childish saying this all aloud, especially to the one who held the mantle of Champion before him. Hell, she'd probably still hold the title if she didn't decide to quit the ranked matches. That's what's always bothered Izuku: he never got the title fairly. He got it by default, as he was always the runner up.

So having to say *let* to Dragon Lady, having to admit that a pro hero

has him on a damn leash, controlling his every activity, is just humiliating. It's beneath what he's tried so hard to represent his vigilante persona as.

His weakness and obedience is insulting to every Club member.

Izuku continues on to make up for the silence. "I haven't been doing my job, and they got hurt because of it. I know that I should've—"

"You put Stain behind bars, didn't you?"

The first raindrop hits the top of Izuku's head. Another drops onto his arm. "What?"

"Everyone saw what you did. It's a miracle you're still breathing after what you accomplished with those other boys." There's the clinking of a glass. Izuku imagines her downing a shot of some kind. *"No one is upset at you for taking a break, Rabbit. You've done more than enough for us. You don't need to prove yourself when you've already done it time and time again."*

Izuku swallows. "It's my fault he was out there to start with, though."

"Ugh, don't be so arrogant. You weren't the only person he was around. We were there too when he was a member. And we were all more capable than you were back then, kid. We should've been able to stop him. Hawks said it was all of our faults, and I hate to say it, but he was right on that."

But it was mostly Izuku's fault, though, wasn't it? As Stain's pseudo-apprentice, he had a duty to take him down. And Izuku was just never strong enough. He wasn't fast enough. Izuku was young, sure, but it doesn't excuse the things he let slide.

"If you can't come yet, so be it. It's probably for the best, anyway." Her words are swift. *"I doubt that winged bastard will return anytime soon. He got what he came for, so he won't be that ballsy again for a while. Now, I have a meeting with the board in a minute. I'll tell you how that goes and fill you in. Talk to you later."*

The quick change of topic has Izuku's head spinning. "Yeah. I'll, uh, see you." He bites his lip, mulling over what she said. "Thank you. For everything."

"I'm glad you're not dead, Rabbit. Really would've spoiled my week if I had to officially come out of retirement."

The call ends, and Izuku hunches over on the curb, letting the drizzle of rain soak into his clothing. The droplets feel like small pins and needles on his bad arm.

He scrolls through all of the messages he received again, searching for details he might've missed. He can still barely believe it, even after talking to Dragon Lady. The idea of Hawks, an esteemed and high ranking pro hero, deciding to just stroll into a very large and successful organized crime group's location for some information on a pill is *bizarre* to Izuku.

He's not an idiot! He knew Hawks wasn't going to let their little run-in with each other go, and he knew the pro had some tricks up his sleeve, but this? Seriously?

The longer Izuku thinks about it, the more upset he becomes. The more… angry he is.

How dare Hawks go into Izuku's second home and injure his friends? His coworkers? What makes him think he has the right to do that? If he wanted to know something about Izuku, about Rabbit, he should've fucking *asked* him.

It's altogether too clear now that Hawks knows about his identity. But Izuku doesn't care about that. He just wants to know why the hell Hawks went to the doctor first for answers instead of going straight to Izuku? It's not like it would've been hard!

Just a little bit of blackmail—his identity would've worked just fine—and Izuku would've had no choice but to cooperate and tell Hawks whatever he wanted! He must've known he could've done that, right? Hawks isn't stupid, either. He knows how much power he holds. The only other option is that Hawks did this on purpose. That he purposefully stormed their location and hurt the members to humiliate the Club and get Izuku pissed off.

And it's working. Very well, in fact.

Izuku only realizes that Aizawa has walked up on him when he doesn't feel any more rain hitting him. He glances up, and the man is holding an umbrella over him.

"That was a long minute," Aizawa starts.

"Your fault for actually counting."

Aizawa nods in agreement before sitting down on the curb a few feet away from Izuku. For a long minute, the two of them sit quietly and listen to the rain hitting the cars around them.

Eventually, Aizawa stuffs his free hand in his pocket, as if to keep it warm. “They’ll understand that you won’t be able to go check on them yet. I wouldn’t worry so much.”

The statement doesn’t surprise Izuku at all. Really, he should’ve guessed this would happen too. “You knew,” he says, staring straight ahead of him.

Aizawa tilts his head. “Well, I am a member, thanks to you. I was told around thirty minutes ago. I’m not sure how she got my number, but after you didn’t answer her for hours, I guess she became concerned and texted me.” In a lower voice, he adds, “She thinks I’m your keeper or something.”

Izuku feels annoyed by the mere thought of anyone considering Aizawa his keeper, but now is not the time to argue over stupid things, so he doesn’t say anything about it.

“Is that why you went after me? In the bathroom?” Izuku sniffs, irritation biting at his skin like the cold sneaking up around them. “Were you going to tell me then?”

“Actually, I thought you already knew, so I wanted to check on you. I thought you’d be upset. Turns out you were, but not over this.”

Izuku frowns at the reminder of what happened before this. His cheeks redden. He pretends it’s because of the chill. “I wasn’t upset. I… I don’t care about what happened with Yagi and them. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“I’m not the one you’re trying to convince.”

Taking a deep breath in, Izuku tries to remember the calming exercises Yamada taught him a couple weeks ago. “You make me angry when you assume shit about me that’s not true. You don’t know me.”

Aizawa ignores the dramatic, blatantly untrue declaration. “You’re taking this Hawks thing better than I thought.”

“What did you think I’d do? Go on a rampage?”

“Here? No. I taught you better self control than that.” He points out to the city, where the buildings stretch all the way to the sky. “Out there? You’ve done it before.”

At least he remembers, En says thoughtfully.

“You didn’t teach me anything.” The words come out bitter and sharp, surprising even Izuku.

“That’s what you focused on?”

Just to give him a taste of his own medicine, Izuku ignores the question and instead pushes the topic back on track. “I’m going to kill him.”

Aizawa doesn’t need to ask who. “No, you’re not.”

“I want to go to the Club tonight. I need to see how they’re doing. I—I have to see them.”

“You’re not in a state to go anywhere.”

Izuku glances at him, eyes piercing. “I wasn’t asking.”

“And I’m still denying you.”

“You could come with me,” Izuku points out.

“I’m not going to jeopardize your safety by letting you run around as Rabbit. Whether I come with you or not won’t change the fact that Hawks may be out there waiting. Who’s to say he didn’t do this just to draw you out of hiding?”

It’s obvious Kaida didn’t tell you exactly why Hawks did what he did…

One for All activates almost as an afterthought. Izuku lets the warmth of the red sparks protect him from the rain. “I’m not hiding. You’re just keeping me locked up.”

“Your injuries are keeping you locked up,” Aizawa corrects.

“I’ve never been this healthy before and you know that. I’m not even injured anymore. You guys are just *delusional—”*

“Let’s not do this again, Midoriya.”

Izuku looks away, face shadowed. *Inhale for four seconds, hold it for*

seven, and exhale for eight. In for four, hold for seven, out for eight.

He repeats this phrase to himself and follows it until his fists unclench and his muscles aren't as tightly wound. He hopes Yamada is proud of him.

Aizawa adjusts the umbrella when the rain starts to come down harder. "Give it a few days, kid. If there's no sign of Hawks seeking you out directly, we can go."

We. Izuku's jaw sets at the word.

He stands up from the curb and starts the walk back to the car, not replying to his teacher's statement.

If he looks at him again, he may just punch him. He knows it would be totally unfair and uncalled for, though. It's not Aizawa he's mad at.

Not this time.

Izuku stuffs his black hoodie into the duffel bag, moving with a sense of franticness he hasn't felt since those nights where he was hunting down those villains involved in the USJ attack.

He's focused now, thoughts going in one smooth direction. He's already spent the hours since he arrived back at the apartment worrying, panicking, and trying not to snap.

Now he's determined and has a plan for the time being. While he's still a little unsteady, he thinks he has a better handle on himself than before.

He throws deodorant and a toothbrush in his bag, shoving his boots in there as well. Not really looking, he opens his drawer and grabs a few pairs of underwear and socks, chucking them behind himself to land in the open duffel bag. He doesn't care what he's bringing exactly. He just knows that he's *leaving,* so he needs some kind of clothing change.

“Izuku.”

He spins around, clutching his UA uniform close to his chest. No one is there to match the voice, though. The darkness of the guest room stares back at him, fucking with his sanity yet again.

Izuku lets the sparks of One for All light up the room, and he searches the cracks and corners with his eyes, not breathing until he’s made sure there’s no one there.

He doesn’t sense a quirk anywhere besides Yamada and the other neighbors in the building. Izuku is alone here.

But it doesn’t feel like it now.

Izuku turns back around and clutches the dresser, hanging his head, willing himself to get a grip. He already had a quiet breakdown where he laid under the bed for an entire hour and stared at his journal, unseeing, so he really doesn’t need another one.

At the reminder of his journal, Izuku goes to the edge of the bed and ducks under it, reaching out a hand to get it.

“Ignorance doesn’t suit you.”

Izuku jerks, the top of his head hitting the bed frame. He pulls away and throws the knife he set on the bed toward where he thought he heard the noise. The blade imbeds in the wall with a clean *shing!*

Frustrated at his mind’s inability to make any sense, Izuku uses Pull to yank his knife back and put it in the bag alongside his journal.

“I’m fucking losing it,” he pants, sliding down his bed to rest for a second now that he’s packed his things. “You know, I thought going crazy would be a lot more fun than this.”

You’re not going crazy, Shinomori says, his even tone a warm blanket falling over Izuku’s shoulders. *I know crazy, Ninth, and that is not you.*

“Thank y—”

Not yet.

Izuku can’t even be surprised.

Shimura huffs. *Did you really have to add that last part? We’re supposed to be comforting him.*

What do you mean? I am comforting him. I'm not lying to him.

Banjou barks out a laugh. *Both of you are shit at this.*

Shimura obviously isn't about to let him insult them like that, if her next words are any indicator. *Really? And what have you done to help Izuku?*

More than you, actually. Just last week I—

Izuku resolutely tunes them out, because then he's looking up, away from the carpeted floor, and meeting his own eyes in the body mirror propped up on the wall. He blinks, and his wings are there again. Black, void like appendages hang over his small form threateningly, and talons glint in the moonlight streaming in through the window.

They're gone in the next second, and Izuku's back aches. He reaches his arm behind himself to rub at his shoulder blades, feeling the weight of the wings even though he has none.

"Get up."

Izuku finds himself obeying immediately, hands coming down to rest at his sides. He doesn't bother searching for the owner of the voice this time, knowing he won't find it anyway.

He's just hearing things that aren't there. Maybe he's tired! That could be the cause, right? Izuku has hallucinated clowns and whole circus events before due to lack of sleep and alcohol, so this is probably no different. So what if the voice sounds like it's right there, in front of Izuku and all around him? So what if it's the most real thing he's heard and experienced since the feeling of that burning fire in his building on his skin?

He's fine. This will pass soon.

Izuku steadies himself and makes for the door, trying to ignore his nerves. If he were paying closer attention, maybe he would've seen the patch of white hair hidden beneath his more unruly curls on the side of his head, but as it stands he's way too busy to notice it.

But eventually, in a moment of pure chaos, he will.

Izuku finds Yamada sitting in his armchair and drinking his detoxifying tea, a science fiction novel in hand. It's past eight already, which means now is Yamada's reading and grading time. He always

sits out here and absentmindedly watches TV while waiting for Aizawa to get off patrol.

The words fall from Izuku's lips before Yamada even notices he's there. "Can I stay at All Might's place tonight?"

The blond hero pauses his reading and frowns, staring at him over the top of his glasses. "Sorry, whatcha say, kiddo?"

Izuku wilts internally, as that response isn't in the script he made up in his head just now. He swallows the lump in his throat, focusing on the television off to the side, which is playing some rerun of an old cartoon. "I, uh, wanted to ask if… if I could go. To… All Might's place. Tonight."

While Yamada seems to try and find his voice, Izuku focuses on the mouth of the character on screen and imagines what she could be saying, as both the subtitles and volume are off.

Yamada sits up and places his book on his knee. "You mean right now?"

"Yes." He winces. "Sir."

The pro hero makes a weird face at that, but it's gone before Izuku can make sense of it. "You do know that it's really late, right? Are you sure he'll even be up?"

Izuku nods quickly. "He has a lot of paperwork to do that he can't finish at school, so he doesn't usually sleep until ten. And he—he won't mind it! He told me that he wouldn't care if I came over. No matter the time!"

Yamada is quiet for a second. Izuku would kill to be able to read his mind right now. "I mean, I don't see why you wouldn't be able to go. Do you mean to just go see him, or to spend the night?"

Izuku shifts on his feet, hopeful now that his answer may be in his favor. "The night. Or two."

He peers at him, concern swirling in his emerald gaze. "I have to be honest here, listener, I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you going out so late, and with such short notice, too. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah! I'm just—just curious about what his place looks like, that's all! And I—I wanted to go see what the view looks like at night,

since his apartment is kinda in a skyscraper, isn't it? I heard it was nice, and, uh, very… All Might-ish."

Yamada's face clearly says *come on, now,* but he doesn't question the legitimacy of his student's claims aloud. Izuku has been subjected to this kind of look enough times now that he's not fazed one bit, so he won't be revealing anything else.

Instead, he chews on the inside of his cheek and forces himself to look Yamada in the eye instead of anywhere else. "It's not you," he assures awkwardly. "Or—or even Aizawa. I just need to see him again. Face-to-face. Texting isn't really his thing, y'know?"

"You saw him today at the mall," Yamada points out, but he doesn't sound judgmental. "Did something happen between then and now? Besides… you-know-what."

Izuku's face darkens, and he scratches at the scar on his jaw. He figured Aizawa filled his partner in on the Hawks situation. "No. Like I said, it's just a feeling. That's all."

Yamada nods consideringly, seeming to take the response. He stands up from his chair. "In that case, let me call him first and—"

"You don't need to," Izuku says, a little bit of excitement pouring into his voice at the realization that Yamada is practically already saying yes. "I just texted him!"

He holds out his phone, showing the message he just typed out and sent. As Yamada watches, Yagi's surprised yet happy response allowing Izuku to come over pops up on the screen.

Yagi has gotten way faster at typing, thankfully. Izuku is glad for that.

Yamada laughs a little, but it sounds more awkward than anything. "Alright. I'm glad he said yes, but I'm going to call him anyway just to make myself feel better, okay? It's good to establish that kind of communication for stuff like this."

Geez, he's acting like a divorced parent planning for a weekend swap, Banjou says exasperatedly.

There's a crisp *slap,* making Izuku shudder, and he doesn't hear from Banjou again.

Yamada gestures down the hallway. "Well, if you're staying the night,

you better pack a bag so you're prepared while I call and—"

It takes four seconds for Izuku to speed to the guest room with One for All biting at his ankles, grab the duffel bag off his bed, and return right beside Yamada, who shrieks at the sudden wind.

"Already did," Izuku says happily, holding up the bag for proof.

"Woah! Okay, yeah, you… did." Yamada lowers his phone. "That's a little big for just a night or two."

"I pack heavy."

"Huh. You can go start the car and set your stuff down. I'll lock up and be right behind you."

For a second, Izuku is overtaken by joy with the amount of trust Yamada is showing by handing him the keys to the car and telling him to head down there alone. He knows damn well Aizawa would never do that.

But his joy is short lived, as he really wants to go about this a different way. "You don't have to drive me! I can walk there. It's only twenty minutes away."

"Kiddo, it's pitch black out there. This time of night is a breeding ground for armed crime. I can't let you just walk by yourself—"

Izuku laughs a little. "I can take care of myself, Yama. I've had my fair share of nightly walks." He says the last part jokingly, but Yamada's eyes narrow upon hearing it.

"I'm not letting you patrol—"

"That's not what I was meaning, I promise. I just want to go to All Might's. That's it!" He puts his hands together. "I swear!"

Yamada's expression hardens. "Son, I'm driving you, and that's that. End of discussion."

Izuku opens his mouth to argue but just as quickly snaps it shut. It's rare that Yamada acts like that, so he's not going to get on his bad side and risk not being allowed to go by being difficult. He wordlessly takes the keys from Yamada's hand and obediently rushes out to the hallway. He doesn't even go for the elevators! He instead takes the outside stairs and jumps a large portion of the way down, his duffel

bag breaking his fall.

Sue him for being happy. The cool night air is making him forget about what happened previously, making way for a childish kind of excitement.

He's never seen All Might's apartment. He isn't sure how his mentor lives outside of work and heroics, so this should be fun!

It only takes five minutes for the two of them to get out on the road. Yamada taps his fingers along the steering wheel despite there being no music. Izuku stares out the window of the passenger's seat, barely able to contain himself.

"You packed your comb, right?" Yamada asks on the way there. "And shampoo and conditioner? I doubt Yagi has products for your curly hair."

Izuku nods. "Yep! I packed them!"

"Do you have toothpaste? Floss? Did you remember your medicine?"

"Unfortunately."

"Great! Remember to take it in the morning and night. Don't drink orange juice with it, as that messes up the—"

"Digestion, I know," Izuku interrupts, his knee bobbing up and down.

"Did you only pack one pair of sneakers or two?"

"It's only a night or two, so I packed one. I'll be fine."

Yamada sighs. "Next time, pack two. You should always pack more than one just in case. Oh, and slippers, too! You brought them, right?"

"Yes, sensei. Everything's fine! I got everything."

They pull into the parking lot of what Izuku guesses is Yagi's building, and *oh,* it's a skyscraper alright. Izuku can't even see the top of it!

"Do you have your scar cream?" The voice hero asks worriedly, pulling into an empty spot in front of the entrance.

"Yama," Izuku complains, glaring at him.

The man huffs. "Sorry, listener, I'm just a little frazzled. It's not that I

don't trust you to stay where you said you'd be going, it's that if something happens, I won't know about it until it's too late. It really is dangerous out here, even with the number one hero by your side." Yamada grips the wheel even though they're in park, his knuckles turning white at the force. "I'm still not even sure this is a good idea, especially with what happened recently. I should have called and asked Sho before allowing you to—"

Patience running thin, Izuku unbuckles his seatbelt and reaches down into his duffel bag, pulling out the new wristband he stuffed in the side pocket. He holds it out to Yamada, face set in concentration.

Yamada furrows his eyebrows. "What's that?"

"I remade Nezu's shitty—er, *crappy* design. It's a panic button, sir. Just a better one. It still connects with the app you guys have, as I made it with the same software as the last one. You can monitor my location, vitals, and even hear what I'm hearing if I have the microphone on." Izuku pauses. "Okay, that's a little weird now that I'm thinking about it, but you get the idea."

Izuku's wristband shimmers in the light of the streetlamp behind them. He snaps it on, and the sleek black material changes color to match Izuku's skin tone perfectly, blending in with ease. A near undetectable red button flashes on the underside of it, similar to the system of the previous one.

"*You* made this?" Yamada asks in awe, moving closer to get a better look. "That was fast! It looks amazing!"

Izuku inwardly preens. "It won't break as easily as the other one. Look, not even I can rip it off once it's on." He shows himself pulling at it with the aid of Boost. It's difficult to even get a finger under the material with how flush it is against his skin. "It's stretchy, durable, and interwoven with steel, similar to Aizawa's scarf. It's also bulletproof."

"Incredible," Yamada praises. He pokes at it, eyes lighting up.

"If you're scared I might get hurt somehow, or wander away from here, just check the app. I won't take it off."

"How *do* you even take it off?"

"It's fingerprint sensitive," Izuku explains. As a demonstration, he places his index finger on a small portion of the fabric closest to the

right side of his wrist. The wristband puffs up and then loosens, practically falling off of his arm when Izuku lets his hand hang down. “I use the app to register the fingerprints it responds to. I’m the only one on it right now, so let me add yours.”

Izuku types a few things on his phone after opening the software app and then tells Yamada to hold out his index finger. A hologram appears above his screen, and Izuku guides Yamada’s finger to hover over a black box on it. After a few moments, there’s a buzzing sound, and then a green check flashes in the hologram.

Initialization complete. New fingerprint added to system database. Transferring files.

Izuku shoves his phone inside his pocket and places the band back on his wrist, getting used to the feel of it.

While he hated Nezu’s wristband and wanted to break it himself half the time, there’s something about this one that makes him feel not nearly as bloodthirsty.

This one doesn’t seem like a chain to him, no. Rather, it feels freeing —which is weird. It should be anything but, shouldn’t it? It shouldn’t be making him feel so light.

Izuku finds that he likes knowing there are other people who can watch out for him. It’s comforting, almost.

Maybe there’ll be a time where it’ll come in handy.

“So, can I go now?”

Hizashi inspects Midoriya’s face. His expression is neutral, though his eyes are shining and his eyebrows are raised, signifying a question.

To most everyone else, Midoriya probably looks innocent, joyful, and full of hope at the idea of staying over at his favorite hero’s place— and he is, really. Hizashi isn’t stupid enough to think that he’s not excited over this situation.

But he also isn't so naive to miss the way Midoriya's eyes are darting around, scanning Hizashi's face in the same way that he's currently scanning his. Midoriya has a problem with eye contact. He only ever holds someone's gaze when he's being particularly serious, or when he's trying his very hardest to seem believable.

More specifically, when he's hiding something.

That, coupled with the way that Midoriya is biting the inner part of his cheek (Hizashi is good at picking out that stuff), clearly shows that there is indeed something more going on here.

It's glaringly obvious to Hizashi, who's been a hero for a decade now and has trained in the art of seeing what others can't, that Midoriya is about to do something he knows he shouldn't.

Which is the only reason he could have decided being at All Might's place during a time like this was a better option than staying where Hawks wouldn't be able to find him.

But he also knows that Midoriya has a relatively good head on his shoulders. He's not stupid either. Sometimes, though, he's a little misguided.

Hizashi has Yagi's phone number, so he isn't too worried yet. He also *sort of* threatened to hurt the man if he didn't pay close attention to his ward, which wasn't needed with how meticulous and paranoid he knows All Might is, he's aware of that, but still. It made Hizashi feel better, so it was worth it.

He told Yagi about Midoriya's medicine schedule in case the boy tries to skip a dose, and he forwarded the list of meals he's medically not able to eat yet. Doctor's orders, of course.

"Sensei?" Midoriya prompts, having been kept waiting for too long already. He's antsy, practically itching to get out of the car and run to the entrance. He has a hand on his duffel bag and the other on the handle of the door.

Maybe he really has been needing this.

Hizashi smiles and nods. "Text me when you get inside. Yagi should be waiting for you. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. But also—"

"Don't do anything you *would* do," Midoriya finishes. "Got it!"

The green-haired boy hops out of the car, and Hizashi watches their surroundings for a moment just to make sure there aren't any sickos waiting to ambush them.

"And son?" Hizashi calls.

Midoriya pauses, head going up to stare at him. Hizashi fixes him with an even look, his tone sweet but no-nonsense.

The demand in it is clear.

"Leave the costume here."

Hizashi can clearly see the boy's *oh, shit* moment. Midoriya falters, his hand tightening on his duffel bag, and Hizashi swears he can literally see his soul leaving him, taking with it the gleam in his eyes.

But Hizashi doesn't break yet. If he has to be the bad parent here in Shouta's absence, so be it. He'll be the bad parent for however long it's needed if it means Midoriya isn't going to get involved in something that will end up with his head under a guillotine.

Midoriya leans back, fiddling with his shirt now. "Yama, I—I wasn't gonna use it—"

"I thought we agreed not to lie to each other?"

Shame immediately colors his expression, and he looks down, as if thinking hard. Hizashi waits patiently, making sure not to allow even one singular crack in his demeanor, and eventually Midoriya shuffles around and digs in his bag.

He unzips what's probably supposed to be a secret compartment and takes out his neatly folded Rabbit costume, complete with the boots, gloves, and heavy mask.

Midoriya hands it all over reluctantly, the tips of his ears shining a bright red. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"Thank you," Hizashi says, setting the costume in the back seat and making a mental note to take it out when he gets back home. "You're alright, kiddo. You'll be just fine."

What he's trying to say is *you shouldn't need to have your costume. I can't allow you to have it because I know you, and I know you'll end up doing something rash even without meaning to.*

Hizashi feels bad taking away one of the only things he knows makes Midoriya feel safe and comfortable, but he has to, doesn't he? After the Hawks situation, after what Midoriya said to Shouta about wanting to *kill* the hero… Hizashi can't let him have the costume with good faith.

He thought Shouta had the costume somewhere in the office anyway, saying as Midoriya is supposed to be grounded, but that's something Hizashi will discuss with his husband later. Now isn't the time.

Midoriya nods, though Hizashi isn't confident he actually believes him. The boy sullenly zips back up his belongings, and he steps away from the car, almost hesitantly. "Yeah. Thank you." He scratches at his scar again, and Hizashi has a feeling he did in fact leave his scar cream behind. "For letting me go, that is. I won't make you regret it."

Hizashi's smile thins a little. Midoriya shouldn't feel like he has to say thanks for this. He's not a prisoner, and it's not like he has to *earn* these things or something.

But Hizashi knows it's hard for Midoriya to take it any other way, so he holds his tongue on it. "'Course! Stay safe, please, and don't forget to text me!"

He gets a thumbs up in reply, another—this time much quieter—thanks, and then Midoriya is shutting the door and speed walking to the entrance.

Hizashi watches him like a hawk the entire way, and when Midoriya leaves his vision upon entering the building, he turns and calls Shouta.

Hopefully his husband won't chew him out for this one.

Izuku has only been in one place fancier than this one right here.

It was his thirteenth birthday, actually, and he took a job that asked him to get as much information on a retired pro hero as he could. Apparently there were rumors that he was blackmailed to hang up his cape. So, Izuku went to find out why.

The job promised to pay well, and getting information is his specialty, so it was a win-win in his book.

He planned to trap the hero by putting soapy water all over the floor, as that was the only weakness the man had (slippery substances, oddly enough), and force the information out of him. He didn't even need to do that, though, as pretty quickly he realized what the blackmail was.

The bastard was cheating on his fiancé. With *eight different people.* At once.

Yeah. The things Izuku saw would make any grown man recoil. Some of his worst nightmares are about that stuff—but anyway!

The apartment building the hero stayed at was super fancy, and it was hell to get into. The staircases spiraled up and were made out of gold, and they had a full complimentary dining and bar service on the lower levels for guests. All for free!

There was security at every entrance, and Izuku saw about a dozen other limelight heroes walking around. The chandeliers were bigger than Izuku's apartment, and they lit up all the floors with ease.

The building also had a fucking ball room! Crazy, right? Izuku still doesn't know how he didn't get thrown out immediately. He guesses the suit he stole from Kacchan did him a favor.

So, yes, while All Might's building here is spectacular, it's second to the fanciest place Izuku has ever been in. That's still insanely impressive, however, as Izuku has broken into a lot of wealthy places.

The interior is crisp, sleek, and modern, with a gold and silver aesthetic. Pristine white staircases spiral up similar to the other building Izuku was in, and white balls of light hang in the air without a bar or wire, reminding him of that one old fantasy school called Hogwarts.

The first floor extends up thirty feet, and Izuku stares at the moving paintings on the ceiling with awe, momentarily starstruck. The current top ten pro heroes of Japan are pictured there, and each have their own animal encapsulating their personality right beside them. It's funky, it's weird, and Izuku fucking *loves* it!

A woman wearing a suit that looks entirely too uncomfortable clears her throat, jolting him from his thoughts. "Can I help you with something, dear? I don't think I've seen you around here before."

Izuku sheepishly walks over to her desk, realizing that she's probably the receptionist. "Hi! I'm, uh, visiting someone."

"Uh-huh. Can I get an ID or badge number?"

Badge number? Oh, shit. That's right; Izuku forgot that this place is like a gated community but in skyscraper form. It's like an elite little club! You have to be registered or at least have a special number or code to have entry. "I don't have one, ma'am. I'm waiting on—"

"Listen, hon, I've had a lot of teens come in here this week to try and break in. It's like the newest trend." She sounds disgusted by the mere thought of it. Her long acrylic nails tap at the polished white desk she's sitting at. "So, if that's what you're doing here, please save yourself the trouble. I didn't receive any notice that any of the residents here were expecting someone today, so if you don't have a badge, I need to ask you to remove yourself."

Izuku puts his hands on the counter and stands up on his tip-toes to speak to her more directly. "I'm not breaking in! I really am just here to see my—"

"I can call security, if you'd rather."

Appalled at the reaction, Izuku shrinks back, skin itching uncomfortably. Jesus. What crawled up her ass and died today? He knows she's just doing her job, but damn!

Izuku barely has enough time to react before she's reaching for what he assumes is a button to summon help, but then there's a *ding,* and the golden elevator on the far left of the wall opens up.

Just like that, Izuku is saved.

To say Izuku sighs in relief upon seeing Yagi's face would be an understatement. He nearly falls over!

Thank God. I really didn't want to be carried out by security at this time of night. That would've been so humiliating. But the more Izuku thinks about it, the more he questions just how embarrassing it would've been. He's been kicked out of many places by men in black suits before, so what would be the difference if he's kicked out now? Besides, Pitbull has been there and done that, so why would he be ashamed?

"Ah, Young Midoriya!" Yagi exclaims, taking stock of the situation

immediately. He rushes over to them, wearing rumpled clothing and mismatched slippers. Izuku likes them. “I’m very sorry, ma’am! I didn’t have time to warn you like normal, you see. He’s with me!”

The receptionist switches up immediately after realizing who she’s talking to. “Oh, Mr. Yagi! Of course! My mistake. I was just making sure he wasn’t a part of that band of delinquents running around lately.”

Band of delinquents? Izuku has to take a second to question if he’s in said band. He honestly can’t remember, but he wouldn’t put it past himself to be in it.

The lady turns to Izuku with a much warmer look, and she hands him a heavy, metal card with a barcode on it. “In that case, dearie, take this. It’s a badge for going in and out of the building as you please. Don’t lose it.”

Izuku’s lips part in surprise. The card itself feels more expensive than anything he’s ever owned. Just how rich is Yagi, anyway? He knows being a teacher at UA is pretty great in itself, but being the number one hero of Japan for literal decades on top of that? Not to mention how successful his merchandise and branding is?

I knew it. He’s absolutely stacked, Shimura says. *He’s living on a throne of cash, that little brat.*

Despite the words, Izuku thinks she sounds proud.

He bows his head at the receptionist, holding the card very carefully. “Thank you, ma’am! Sorry for the trouble!”

“It’s alright!” She assures, waving him off.

Yagi takes hold of Izuku’s shoulder and leads him to the elevator he came out of, a thin sheen of sweat on his face. He sounds breathless when he speaks. “You really could have given me more of a notice, my boy.”

Izuku laughs nervously, rubbing his arm when Yagi lets go of him. “Yeah, I know. That’s my bad.”

The blond sighs softly. “It’s not a big issue. They’re just very strict here with who comes in and out. It’s partially why I chose to live here; it has the best security and privacy. In fact, a lot of other heroes live here.”

Yagi presses level eighty-one, and the button lights up. Izuku's eyes nearly bug out of his own head, and he has to blink a couple of times to ensure he's not hallucinating again.

"You live on the eighty-first floor?" He asks. "That's, like, almost near the very top!"

Yagi chuckles at his reaction. "Indeed." He presses another button off to the side labeled *night view.* Immediately, three of the walls of the elevator glimmer, and then the gold and white coloring washes away, revealing clean glass that overlooks the city.

Izuku can't stop the gasp from escaping his lips this time. "Woah," he whispers, stepping closer to the glass to watch as they rise higher and higher above the dark streets. The lights of cars and store signs glitter and blink, and Izuku feels a wide grin stretching on his face. "It's… beautiful."

"It really is nice, yes." Yagi laughs again. He stands in silence for a few moments, watching Izuku observe the outside world, but after a bit he crosses his arms. "So, while I'm pleased you wanted to come visit, I do have to ask what brought this on. Did you not get tired of me today at the mall?"

His tone is light and teasing, but it still makes Izuku blush. "I mean, I've been wanting to see your apartment for a long time now, and what you said today just… kinda made me want to check it out now. And, uh, I just needed a break from everything?" At Yagi's worried glance, Izuku hurries to correct himself. "I'm not saying I'm coming here just to get away from them! Not at all! It's just that you offered and I realized I really did want to spend more time with you and—and not in a school or *training* way, just in a get to *see* you way! But not too personal, y'know? Because that'd be kinda weird and invasive and __"

"I think I understand," Yagi says, cutting him off. "Besides today, we haven't really had time to just…" He trails off, searching for the word.

Izuku searches for it, too. He loves language, but not even he can find what it is.

He knows All Might, as he's studied him for years and copied his moves and bought most of his merchandise. He's fought alongside him and trained with him for a good while now, too!

But has he really gotten to know *Yagi?* Separate from All Might? Is that someone that Izuku should know a lot about? He *is* Yagi's successor, after all. Shimura said that the users of One for All should be like a family, and while Izuku cares for Yagi a lot, and he'd do pretty much anything for him, he still doesn't know the things about him that a family member would.

Hell, he doesn't even know Yagi's favorite color. Is it yellow? He can't recall. Did he ever have a family pet? Did he have a dog?

These may sound like trivial questions, but to Izuku they're important. This stuff is a big deal to him now.

He doesn't want to die not knowing his hero's other life. Something inside of him, however, says that that will end up happening despite his best efforts.

Unlike a lot of other things in Izuku's life, this is something he simply won't accept.

Chapter End Notes

> "and you love him. tell me, if he handed you a bloodied hand, would you take it only because it was his?"
>
> izuku is opening up? somewhat? he is 100% not doing this for ulterior motives I assure you :)) none at all. he is not trying to escape and fight a hero, I promise. he is being very Good. up next? some heavy talks between Izuku and all might that have been a long time coming
>
> also another reason I feel like mic let Izuku go to all might's is bc he hasn't had much time to spend alone with Aizawa since Izuku is around so much, so he saw this opportunity and was like fuck yeah I'm dumping the kid off at his other dad's so we can go on a date
> h

depths of forgiveness

Chapter Notes

izuku has some talks with all might

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We haven’t had time to talk,” Izuku finishes, pressing a hand up to the glass. They’re rising up so quickly now that if Izuku wasn’t already so obsessed with heights and thus used to this, he’d probably be sick.

“Talk, yes.” Yagi tilts his head. “Is that why you wanted to see me?”

Izuku’s gaze drops lower. “Sorta. I… I really am sorry for throwing this on you. I hope you didn’t say yes just because you, like, felt *bad* or __”

“Not at all,” Yagi assures. “Trust me, I don’t mind this at all. I don’t get a lot of visitors here. Not anymore.”

The way he says that last part has Izuku perking up. He wonders who the last person to visit All Might here was. Maybe Gran, he thinks. Or was it another one of his colleagues? Could it be another pro hero? Izuku doesn’t think Yagi is that close to another hero. He’s not the social type like that; he works far too hard and way too much.

But that begs another far more interesting question: has All Might had any past partners?

Does he have a *current* one?

No, no. That’s impossible. Izuku would know if so, right? All Might would’ve told him. Well, he’d like to think so.

Does he *want* a partner? Izuku could hook him up with someone! He knows a lot of strong bachelors at the Club. They’re suitable! Maybe having a significant other like that would make Yagi happier. Maybe he’d be more lively.

But there’s also the issue of safety. All Might would never get close to anyone like that if he thought it would put them in danger.

Huh. That makes Izuku sad. Has All Might isolated himself for that reason? Has he stopped himself from experiencing the joys of love just

to protect others?

Joys of love? Banjou repeats, and Izuku can *hear* the smirk on his face. *And what do you know about that?*

I've read a lot of romance novels, thank you, Izuku thinks back, deadly serious.

Shimura cuts in immediately. *Please don't base real love off of those books, kiddo. That's a terrible idea.*

Izuku gasps silently. *So you're telling me I'm not going to be swept off my feet by a charming knight? But who's going to save me from my dragon-infested castle!*

Speaking for the first time in a while, Second pipes up. *Don't ever say that shit again.*

Duly noted.

"We're here," Yagi announces, breaking Izuku from his inner dialogue. The elevator dings, and the doors slide open smoothly without a sound. Izuku watches as the glass goes back to its original color, concealing the view of the city, and he casts one last longing look back.

Except Izuku comes to a halt immediately after stepping outside the elevator, because now he's in someone's *very* large fucking living room.

"Uh, sir?"

Yagi continues walking inside, heading towards the other end of the room. "Yes?"

"Where's the door?"

"The door?"

"To your apartment."

Yagi glances back at him, brows furrowed. "There is no door. This is it."

Izuku blinks once, then twice. He stares at Yagi, attempting to check if he's lying or not through his empathy quirk, but nothing about the man points to the conclusion that he's just messing with Izuku.

Which can only mean one thing.

Izuku stays where he is, closing his eyes. He drops his duffel bag to the floor and presses his palms against his cheeks. “Are you saying that the elevator opens up… directly into your apartment?”

“Well, yes. Why wouldn’t it?” He puts a hand to his chin. “If you’re worried about someone accidentally walking in here, rest assured that that’s not possible. There are sensors in the elevator to determine if you belong on that specific floor or have been given permission to enter.”

The sound that leaves Izuku’s throat is more befitting of a seven year old girl than a teenage boy, but he can’t even be embarrassed by it yet. He honestly can’t believe what’s happening. This is so *weird* to him.

“So,” Izuku starts slowly, voice hoarse, “you have this entire floor… to yourself? It’s yours?”

Yagi lifts up a bony shoulder in a shrug. “This one and the two floors above it, sure. It’s a part of the suite I bought.”

Izuku doesn’t even hear the last sentence; his consciousness left him after he heard *two floors.* He very nearly faints—in fact, it’s only the buzzing of his phone in his pocket that stops him from overreacting to the news.

Oh, that’s right. He has to text Yamada he made it in.

Izuku fishes out his phone, still slightly in shock. He quickly types out his message and hits the send button with a shaky finger, mind scrambled. ***I’m in. His place is rlly fucking big omg.***

The reply comes seconds later. ***glad ur inside. and right??? that’s what I said when he told me about it. it’s huge! but also watch your mouth.***

Izuku sends a salute emoji and then promptly tunes back into reality.

“Sensei,” he says aloud, making Yagi turn to him again. The hero is on the other side of the large living space, setting down his badge on a counter that introduces a nice kitchen.

“You alright?” Yagi asks. “You look sick, my boy. Do you have that fever again?”

“No, no! I’m just… wow.” Izuku picks up his bag and moves further inside, each movement awkward and slow. “This is… a lot. I didn’t think you lived like this. Everything is so luxurious.”

Yagi coughs into his sleeve. “I guess it is a lot to get used to. Here, I’ll show you where you can set your things. Follow me.”

Izuku gratefully lets his mentor take the lead. He passes by the kitchen (there are four ovens, a large moveable island in the middle, and two smart refrigerators, what the *fuck)* and glances down at the fluffy white rug beneath his feet, lips parted. The living room holds the biggest L-shaped velvet couch he has ever seen, set with a few loveseats and a long crystal coffee table. The wide television on the wall isn’t even a television—it’s a *hologram.*

Now *this* is what Izuku always dreamed of having. This is what his twelve-year-old self always wanted to have in his rundown little apartment. He swore to himself that one day he’d be able to save up enough money and tech to build something like this, and even though those days of Izuku’s life are over for now, he still isn’t over that dream.

Especially not now after seeing it shown in All Might’s place.

“I feel like I’m in a fairytale,” Izuku whispers to himself, drinking it all in.

Yagi laughs sharply. “You really are dramatic about this stuff, aren’t you?”

Izuku isn’t even offended. He doesn’t deny it, instead nodding his head fanatically. “It’s all just so amazing!”

“I can’t tease you much,” Yagi admits, smiling. “I was just like you when my agent first recommended this to me. I could hardly believe I was able to afford this at all.”

Izuku’s eyes are drawn to the floor-to-ceiling windows that are currently defrosting themselves to be transparent. The view is even better than it was in the elevator! *So fucking cool.*

Yagi rounds the bend of the circular corner and points to a smaller elevator next to a black winding staircase. “This first floor is the living area and kitchen, as you just saw. My bedroom is right over there off of that hallway. Now, the second floor holds my office, another bathroom, and the guest room.” He glances at Izuku, looking soft, if

not awkward. “That’s where you’ll be staying. It isn’t decorated much, but it does have all the necessities. Even a computer and desk, if I’m not mistaken, so it shouldn’t be too much different from your room at Aizawa and Yamada’s.”

Izuku takes the stairs to the second floor, deciding that he needs the workout. Yagi follows behind, making an offhand comment about how he usually uses the private elevator just because.

When Izuku comes upon the guest room, it takes all of his willpower not to say the most out of pocket shit. He wants to turn to Yagi and ask him what the fuck he meant by *not much different than Aizawa and Yamada’s,* because this room is most certainly not even *close* to being like Izuku’s at the other place. This one is three times the size of it, with a whole walk-in closet and balcony!

Extract itches at the back of Izuku’s mind. Balcony. *Balcony.* That’s perfect for Izuku. It’s a perfect jumping off spot. Shit, this is all almost too good to be true!

“What’s cool about this room is that you can change the scenery of the windows,” Yagi explains, handing Izuku a touchpad that was sitting on an empty dresser. “You can choose an underwater theme, a rainforest, a desert, a storm, whatever you like. It has a lot of other ones you can download online, too.”

“What the *fuck.”*

Yagi chuckles. “I’m hoping that means you like it.”

“Of course I do! I *love* it! Everything about this place is wicked cool! How couldn't I like it?” Izuku sets his duffel bag onto the king-sized bed at All Might’s direction, following him out of the room to another set of stairs.

“The third floor is where the gym is. It has a lot of nice weights in there that I use to warm up in this form.” He frowns. “Oh, and there’s also the movie room.”

Izuku’s head snaps up. “The *what* room?”

Yagi chuckles. “There are ten reclining seats in the movie room along with a large screened hologram television. There’s a popcorn machine in there too, but I haven’t figured out how to use it yet, so maybe you can do that for me.”

The hero points first to the left side of the floor where the gym is, and Izuku gapes at the large selection of machines and weights waiting around to be used. There's even an area to practice hand-to-hand combat with an AI based to meet your needs!

"It's a real life fighting simulator," Izuku says in a hushed tone, hands coming up to cover his mouth in excitement. "Kacchan would kill to see this."

"The movie room is off to the right if you want to see it, but in the meantime I have to get back to the kitchen." Yagi makes for the stairs, grinning sheepishly. "You do like pork gyoza, yes?"

Izuku drags his gaze away from the wonder that is Yagi's third floor. "Yes, sir! Are you making that?"

"I was in the middle of making some for myself before you texted me," Yagi explains. "I'm making more for the both of us, though. You need to eat, especially with your metabolism. It's a good thing I always have a stocked fridge!"

Izuku can't help but feel guilty hearing that Yagi has to make more food for him. He shifts a little on his feet before following Yagi down the stairs. "You don't need to make any for me, sensei. I had a snack before I came here since Yama was still cooking dinner by the time I left, so it's—"

"A snack? My boy, you need more than a snack. You're still all skin and bones! You need to be eating more, Midoriya. Yamada told me he's been trying to make you eat a better portion. I assure you that he doesn't mind cooking a lot for you. It's no issue!"

Yeah, but to me it feels like it is.

Izuku trudges after him, thinking hard, only to stop when Yagi turns to him after getting to the bottom of the stairs. He looks surprised that Izuku is following him around again like a lost puppy.

"You're not going to see the movie room?" He asks. "Or unpack your things?"

Izuku flushes. "Oh, I was just—I thought I could… help." He rubs his arm. "With cooking. If I can. I thought I could, uh, do that stuff later?"

Thankfully, Yagi takes it in stride. He just nods in the direction of the kitchen. "Great! I'm not a very good cook, so hopefully you'll at least

help me make it edible."

"You've made me lunch before at the park," Izuku says. "I liked your cooking then!"

"Those were sandwiches, Young Midoriya."

"They were still good."

"I'd have to be a pretty special person to mess up sandwiches."

Izuku peeks around Yagi's frame to watch him spread out the gyoza wrappers. "I've seen people do it before."

"Can you get cabbage and a spring onion from the fridge? Should be in the bottom drawer."

Izuku turns on his heel, blinking up at the two large stainless steel refrigerators. "Which fridge?"

"Left one is where the vegetables, fruits, and drinks are. All the meats and sauces are in the right one."

Izuku gets to work immediately, happy just to have something to do. It's a weird thing to get used to, sure, working around Yagi and being able to see the city down below through the windows across the room. But it's not a *bad* weird. Far from it.

Just different. Maybe, in a small way, it reminds Izuku of the old facility where his father stayed. It was nice for sure, though Izuku was never really allowed to touch anything that didn't specifically pertain to him. He was reduced to looking and sneaking in touches on the nice furniture and appliances when not even Kurogiri was around.

He was never usually allowed outside to see the stars either, so Izuku really enjoys the view here.

"That's lettuce," Yagi points out, eyeing the greens Izuku set beside him. "Cabbage is similar but has a more bulbous head underneath the leaves."

Izuku doesn't know what the fuck that means, but he doesn't question it, instead going to trade the lettuce out for the right vegetable this time. Even while cooking for a while with Auntie and occasionally helping out Ms. Hanako, he has trouble telling the difference between the two visually.

While Yagi minces the pork, Izuku begins to make a couple dipping sauces, careful to leave out some of the spices he knows won't digest well in the hero's stomach.

Yagi can't have a lot of spicy foods, but Izuku loves anything hot. That's why he's making both a savory citrus sauce and a spicy dipping sauce, so as to satisfy them both.

It should be delicious! Izuku has made them a few times.

"You're not supposed to have ginger, you know," Yagi tells him without looking. He's busy folding the dumplings and preparing them for a quick boil. He has oil heating up in a pan off to the side to brown them afterwards.

How he knows that Izuku is using ginger without looking is beyond him. Maybe it's the smell.

Izuku huffs and continues mixing it in with the sauce. "It's just a little bit."

"It still increases the risk of bleeding, Midoriya. It's even worse for you since you're taking medication that helps control your blood pressure. Having ginger will cause irregular heartbeat and even give you a heart attack."

Izuku glances at him. "Did you memorize that off a magazine or something?"

He ducks away with a yelp when Yagi turns and makes a swipe for him. The man takes the bowl of ginger away from him, giving him a pointed look. "I'm not going to be responsible for you ending up back in the hospital. They'll kill me if you get hurt on my time."

"It's *ginger—"*

Izuku cuts himself off when he hears vibrating. Yagi's phone is buzzing on the counter, lighting up with a caller ID. Izuku looks at it and doesn't recognize the name.

"Start boiling them for me, please," Yagi says, walking by Izuku to grab the phone. "Sorry, I have to take this. It's one of my agents."

Izuku nods with wide, innocent eyes. The moment Yagi walks upstairs to answer the call (he isn't sure why he does this, as the man knows Izuku will still be able to hear him somewhat even a floor away—not

that Izuku is going to eavesdrop), he twirls around and takes the ginger back.

His sauce doesn't taste the same without it.

"So, is everything okay?" Izuku asks, his mouth full.

Yagi takes another bite of his food, chewing thoughtfully. "Yes, I'd say so. I was just informed that I need to attend another meeting tomorrow to discuss Japan's plans for moving forward after Hosu."

"Huh. They really are putting a lot of this stuff on you to fix."

"It's not just me," Yagi assures, but he still looks a little troubled. Izuku realizes why when he speaks again. "Er, this one is a meeting for the top two pro heroes. Apparently the president of the Hero's Commission wants us to work together and… unite again. To make the people less scared."

Izuku is immediately intrigued. "You and Endeavor would be a great duo. You're both insanely strong."

Yagi sighs quietly. "Yes, but you know that he never likes working with me. It's hard to be a team player with him. He's… difficult."

"You should just beat his ass one good time so he'll stop being so whiny about living in second place."

All Might chokes on his dumpling and has to pound on his chest to cough it up. "I can't just do that, my boy!"

"Why not? He's so obsessed with you that I feel like if you gave him that kind of attention he'd shape up really fast." Izuku taps his chin with his chopstick. He's glad Yagi is letting him use a pair instead of a fork. "I bet it'd work better than you think."

"Whether or not it works doesn't mean it would be *acceptable* for me to do that sort of thing."

Izuku shrugs. "No one besides the both of you would have to know

about it. He'd be too embarrassed to snitch."

Yagi takes a long, calming drink of his water before speaking. "Remind me to teach you later about professionalism and respect for your coworkers, Midoriya. There are do's and don'ts in this industry that you obviously need to learn."

"You know, now that I'm thinking about it, Endeavor is the type to be kinda into that sort of thing, so if you want more visitors to this penthouse you—"

"As I was saying," Yagi says pointedly, voice loud and face flushed, "I have a meeting tomorrow. It should go fairly well, but the problem is that the President of the Commission has also set up a nice dinner between Endeavor and I so we can discuss things ourselves afterwards." He looks away from the table, putting his hands on his knees. "I didn't want to go, but from what I was hearing, it wasn't negotiable. It's strictly for business. Thankfully, though, we're allowed to each bring one other person with us… to make it not as awkward, I suppose."

Izuku pauses his eating to focus his attention on his teacher. All Might looks even older all of a sudden with how tired he seems. There are dark shadows all around his bony face, and bags are planted right below his eyes. He's exuding dread and exhaustion like sweat, and Izuku wishes there was a way for him to take that all away from him.

"I wonder who Endeavor will bring. If he'll bring anyone at all," Izuku adds.

"While I hope he does, if only to relieve our tension, I don't see him doing such a thing. He'll probably try to find a way to miss our dinner anyway. But, on the chance he doesn't, I don't want to be there alone with him if I don't have to. That's just awkward, even for me." He turns to Izuku, and this time he's smiling softly, the corners of his lips twisting upwards while his eyes crinkle. "I was going to ask if you'd like to come with me. It's a fairly nice restaurant, so you won't be disappointed."

Izuku drops his dumpling in his spicy sauce by accident, eyebrows flying to his hairline. "You want *me* to come with you?"

"You don't have to, obviously, I just thought it'd be a nice experience. Especially since you're gunning for a top pro hero spot after UA, yes? It's good to have connections when you get there."

Izuku has trouble believing he was just asked this question. “You want me to have dinner with you and *Endeavor?* My fifth mortal enemy? You do know what I’ve done to him, right?”

This gets a laugh out of Yagi. “Fifth mortal enemy?”

Of course Endeavor is the fifth. He was number four a week ago, but Hawks took his place and bumped him down a spot. Izuku’s first enemy is his father, and his second is Stain. His third worst enemy? Nonstick pans. It’s a love-hate relationship. One would almost call it a parasocial relationship.

Izuku has a background with those pans that no one else will ever understand.

“What if he just… gets angry and storms out?” Izuku asks. “He doesn’t like me any more than he likes you.”

“The both of you got off on the wrong footing,” All Might says, wincing at the reminder of what happened during the parent-teacher conferences and even before then. “I don’t want you to continue to have bad relations like that. Especially with the future number one.”

Future number one? Izuku’s face sours. “You shouldn’t call him that.”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? I’m not going to be here forever. I’m growing weaker by the day; he will eventually take my place.”

This only worsens Izuku’s mood. He doesn’t like hearing All Might talk about himself as if he’s just a placeholder. Especially since Izuku is probably going to kick the bucket sometime soon. Even thinking about All Might dying makes Izuku antsy.

You’re not allowed to die. I won’t allow you to go first. If you go first, I’ll be responsible for finding another successor immediately, since I won’t be lasting long. I could never find someone like you to carry it on.

The only person Izuku would ever give One for All to is Kacchan, but he has a feeling the blond would never accept it if he knew why he was being given it.

“I guess someone else will have to make sure he stays in second, then,” Izuku says, picking at his food now.

What Izuku means by that is he’s going to make Endeavor’s public life so fucking horrible that there’s no way he’s ever going to make it to

being number one, even in the case of All Might's absence.

"You should be focusing on repairing your relationship with him," Yagi chides. "I don't want to see you antagonizing him anymore. Not only is it immature, it's reckless. And generally not smart for an up and coming hero like you."

That sounds familiar, Shimura says, but her voice is distant, like she didn't mean for Izuku to hear it.

Izuku scrunches up his nose. "You don't have to lecture me about this again. I get it."

"And that attitude, too, needs to go. If you're going to come with me, please be on your best behavior. That means no sarcastic remarks or insults. I really am being serious here, young man. I want what's best for you." He leans forward a little on the table. "Making enemies isn't the best idea. Trust me, I learned that the hard way."

Izuku bets he did.

"Now," All Might says, sounding a little more laidback. "You don't have to decide right this second, as I know it'll be a pretty tense situation there, but—"

"I'll go."

Yagi makes a noise of surprise. "You will?"

"Yeah." Izuku picks at his skin. "You said it would be, uh, good experience, right? I'd like to go."

If All Might invited him, it's for a reason. He doesn't want to let him down or miss out on anything. Besides, this will be a great time to practice that empathy quirk. He'd kill to know Endeavor's true feelings!

Be careful, En warns suddenly, and is it just Izuku, or does he sound slightly judgmental?

Be careful? What does that mean?

En's tone doesn't change. *It just means to take caution. Don't endeavor for things you don't want to know.*

You just made a pun.

En doesn't reply back. Izuku has a feeling he's annoyed with him again.

"I'm glad," Yagi says, going back to his food with a beaming smile. "It will be nice to have you there."

"I hope he brings Todoroki."

All Might throws Izuku a curious, almost suspicious glance. "I notice you're getting very close with him. I'm happy to see he's finally opening himself up to his classmates."

"Me too! He really is even more awesome once you get to know him. He's surprisingly…" He trails off, not wanting to finish his thought aloud for fear of embarrassment. He was going to say sweet, but somehow he feels that would be a little too personal.

"Social?" Yagi asks, filling in the blank.

That works well enough, so Izuku nods, resolving to finish the rest of his food. Yagi did pack his plate up pretty high, just like he did his own.

"I used to think you ate in your big form only," Izuku admits suddenly. "I thought that's why you were so… buff."

"That's an interesting thought, but yes, it's actually the opposite. I generally don't like to eat in my big form. When I eat and then transform into my true body, things get a little weird, so I try to wait if I can."

Izuku wonders what would happen if All Might ate ten pounds of meat in his big form and then immediately switched to his true one. Would he have digestion issues? Would he explode?

Well, his internal organs are the same size in both forms, so it's not like he'd explode, really, but he might have some other issues, as he'd have eaten way more than his skinnier self would need. He'd have a lot of waste products and maybe too much storage areas filled. Sure, Yagi eats more than the average human so he'll have the energy ready to use when he transforms, but if he eats even *more* than that while in his big form…

Ethically, Izuku can't ask Yagi to try it as an experiment. He can still be curious though.

“Sasaki would like you,” Yagi states, looking towards the windows.

“Sasaki?”

“He’s a… he was a friend of mine. You’d know him as Sir Nighteye, I bet.”

That’s right. You two were hero partners for a while. Your agencies thrived when the two of you were at the heads.

Izuku doesn’t know why they broke apart. He has a feeling asking about it wouldn’t be well received. So, he keeps quiet for a moment to formulate his response.

“His quirk is pretty cool,” he says, trying to change the subject.

It doesn’t seem to make anything better, though, as Yagi’s face twitches, like in a wince, and Izuku feels a tinge of fear in the air, radiating in waves off of his mentor. It’s weird, as Izuku can never usually sense those kinds of feelings off of Yagi in such high concentrations.

“It defies all logic,” Yagi says simply, nodding to himself. “It’s a power that everyone wishes they had but wouldn’t actually enjoy after having for a while.”

“Really? I can’t imagine *not* enjoying it.” Izuku leans back, thinking. “Being able to get glimpses of the future is just… I’d give anything for it. I could help so many people if I could see the things I shouldn’t do.”

“His visions are never wrong, my boy. Unfortunately, even with intervention and preventative measures, his foresight always rings true in the end.”

Izuku shakes his head. “I don’t believe that. I’m sure there’s something in all of those past situations that could’ve been done to change the outcomes. Even something small that was missed.”

“I’m not sure that’s how it works, Young Midoriya.”

“Most reported foresight quirks have a catch,” Izuku says, “so it’s not outside the realm of possibility. I bet there are—”

“Do you prefer carrot cake or chocolate?” Yagi stands abruptly, heading towards the fridge. “I feel it’s time for dessert.”

That means shut up, Banjou helpfully explains for him.

Izuku stops himself from rolling his eyes. “Maybe *you* should shut up,” he mutters without thinking.

“What?” Yagi asks, taken aback, and Izuku jumps.

“Oh! Not you! Sorry, I was—I was talking to, uh, to myself.” He forces out a laugh to show his aloofness, and he can’t help but realize just how hot it is all of a sudden.

Yagi sets two containers of cake onto the table, moving aside the plates in the way to set down new ones. Izuku sort of feels bad, as he would’ve helped if he thought about it.

“You were talking to yourself?”

“Not in a weird way,” Izuku assures, though that doesn’t sound any better, now that he’s hearing it. “I just… I don't like things to be quiet.”

“Uh huh,” Yagi says slowly. He doesn’t press the topic, thankfully. He just tells Izuku about a nice lady a few floors down who keeps making him baked goods faster than he can eat them.

Izuku, after taking one bite of the carrot cake, falls in love immediately.

“She has a few cats, too, so maybe you can see them one day.”

Oh, Izuku will do more than see them. He’s going to steal them all.

Maybe he should make Ms. Hanako and Yagi’s neighbor fight to the death. While baking, he means. There can only be one pastry master.

Izuku and Yagi continue to laugh and talk to each other while eating cake, and eventually they migrate to the theater room after cleaning up. It turns out that Yagi has access to all of the latest streaming television shows and movies. He can even watch cartoons and anime!

He can’t help but be envious.

“We should watch that new documentary on you,” Izuku offers.

Yagi cringes. “They made another one already?”

“It’s your thirty-seventh one, actually.”

“They can never get my history right.”

Izuku giggles, sprawling out over the reclining chairs as Yagi browses topics. “I like to watch them all and figure out how much of what they’re saying is true. It’s like a game.”

“Those movies always creep me out. Besides, the actors they cast for me look like they’re my twins! It’s eerie.”

“That just means they’re great choices!”

Yagi shudders again and finishes going through the family channel. Finally, he lands on a really old movie called *The Mitchells vs. The Machines.*

It’s an interesting movie, in Izuku’s own fine opinion. It’s weird, funny, and overall kinda sweet. He thinks he relates to the main character in a lot of ways, and he’s not sure how he feels about that realization.

The father in the story reminds Izuku of Aizawa, funnily enough. They both have the same kind of awkwardness and inability to understand certain niche things.

Something about the movie holds Izuku’s full attention, which is a record! Usually, Izuku gets bored of these kinds of childish movies if there’s not enough philosophical or action scenes.

This one is different.

When they finish the movie and are chewing on some popcorn while watching a new nature show (Izuku managed to fix the popcorn machine without attempting to upgrade it into a sentient system, unfortunately), the boy can’t help but glance over at Yagi.

It’s getting a little late now, and the light from the holographic television is the only thing brightening up the room. Yagi is deeply interested in the documentary, if the way he frowns or nods in satisfied surprise when hearing a certain explanation is anything to go by.

Who knew Yagi would like these things?

Somehow he still looks exactly how I remember him the day I left, Shimura murmurs, and it’s like she’s right beside Izuku, watching Yagi too. Her voice is near Izuku’s ear, tickling the shell of it with her

ghostly breath. *He's always had that kind of sad look to him when he thought no one was paying attention.*

Izuku takes a deep breath and feels Shimura's guilt and grief just as clearly as if they were his own. He stares down into his bucket of popcorn.

It's a weird thing, being in between the two of them. Being Shimura's means of *seeing.* Something inside of Izuku shrivels up, and he faintly thinks to himself that he knows exactly what kind of sad look she was talking about. He knows it intimately.

He doesn't know why he does it exactly or what the hell he was thinking, but the soft question falls from his lips anyway, dragging Yagi's focus away from the documentary.

If you ask Izuku later, though, he'll say he doesn't regret it at all.

"Sir?"

Toshinori blinks in surprise, not expecting the sudden honorific. He turns to Midoriya with furrowed brows. "Yes, my boy?"

"I have a weird question." Crooked fingers scratch at a thin white scar on Izuku's collarbone, and Toshinori can't help but wonder how he acquired that one. He doesn't think he's seen it before now. "You don't have to answer it if you don't want to! I mean, that's kinda obvious. I can't force you to do anything… Not that I would want to! It's just that—"

"I'd be happy to answer it," Toshinori interrupts, putting his hands in his lap before turning his full attention to Midoriya. This must be a personal question, he reckons, or maybe one about One for All. The boy wouldn't have waited until now to ask it if not. He's always been too hesitant about asking the questions that really matter.

"After your, uh, *master,"* Izuku says, enunciating the last word slowly, as if testing it out, "after she… after she…"

Toshinori's chest gives a painful twinge. Just by the look on Izuku's face, he can tell what he's trying to say. "Died?" He finishes, just a little stiffly.

“Yeah. After… that.” Midoriya stares anywhere but at him. Toshinori notes how his eyes follow the penguins swimming on the screen. “Did you start to like… I don’t know. Hear things?”

“Hear things?” He repeats.

“Voices. Like, in your head.” Midoriya begins to gesticulate with his hands, which is how Toshinori knows he’s extra nervous. He only ever does that when he’s waiting for something bad to happen. “Sometimes they’re so real that they, uh, sound like they’re right by your ear. Talking to you. Well—sometimes not even to you. They’re just… speaking. Aloud. And you hear it.”

Toshinori sits in quiet panic at the words. He has to mask his rising fear with his confusion in hopes of not scaring Midoriya into silence. “I’m afraid I’m not sure what you mean. I’m sorry, Young Midoriya.”

“No, no! It’s okay! It was a weird question anyway! I shouldn’t have asked.” He laughs, but it sounds horribly fake. “It was a bit personal.”

Toshinori frowns but doesn’t say anything yet. It’s not that Midoriya was out of line to ask the question—not at all! It’s not even that Shimura Nana is a sore subject for him, as Toshinori has talked about her a few times with his successor, specifically while they were having those picnics a few months back. Plus, Toshinori has had a few decades to come to terms with Master’s death, so it’s not a *bad* topic. It’s just that he’s never really liked to think about that stretch of time between Shimura’s death and when he arrived back from the United States.

That was as close to a grieving period as he was allowed, given that All for One was still prowling around in the shadows and basking in the joy of killing yet another One for All holder.

Those years were rough for him, to say the least. He was trying his hardest to make a name for himself in America and beyond while still maintaining a safe distance from his Master’s murderer—as that’s all Gran Torino wanted him to do.

If it had been up to Toshinori, though, who was blinded with rage for most of the time during those days?

Well, he would’ve hunted All for One down and most assuredly paid for it with his life.

He still remembers how hard it was some days to even wake up and

go to the college he attended with David Shield. He remembers how… *unstable* he was. How reckless.

And more than anything, he remembers the fearful looks in those American villains' eyes whenever he rounded the corner of an alleyway and caught them. He remembers the way their trembling felt under his hands.

On the worst days, Toshinori forgot to pull his punches.

He vowed to never slip up like that again.

When Toshinori comes back to himself, Midoriya has already clicked onto the next episode of the nature documentary. He resolutely avoids staring at his teacher, and Toshinori doesn't need to ask to know that he's feeling guilty.

Not wanting Midoriya to think Toshinori's moment of weakness was his fault, the man straightens up and closes his eyes again, bringing back those dark memories from long, long ago. Memories he could never bury no matter how hard he tried.

"For the first few years after she died," he confesses, "I saw her everywhere."

"Shimura?"

"Mhm. I saw her in my dreams more times than I could count. I saw her in my nightmares, too. Sometimes even while I was out fighting villains or just going to buy groceries." He lets the voices and sounds and scents wash over him, slowly coming back to him as he searches through those memories. "Everywhere I went, I would see her somewhere. Mostly, it would just be at the corner of my eye. But other times she'd be right in front of me. She wouldn't even be looking at me. She would just be there. Alive."

With the same suit she had on when she died.

He opens his eyes and meets Midoriya's gaze, who looks like he's just seen something terrifying. His lips are parted and his eyes are wide; he's hanging onto every word.

Toshinori continues, slightly shaky. "I stopped seeing her so much as the years passed, but even now I can… *sense* her sometimes. It's rare, but I can still see her."

And sometimes I just notice her in different ways. Like when I look at you.

Toshinori clears his throat. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything, however. Not unless it was in a dream. I’ve only ever seen things.” He swallows a lump and glances at the boy beside him. “These voices, as you call them… do you hear them often?”

Midoriya jolts to his feet, causing his galaxy blanket to fall off of him. “Oh! I’m not—I’m not asking for me! I’m not hearing anything!” He laughs again, rubbing his bad arm. “It’s actually just, uh, it’s for—”

“A friend of yours?” Toshinori guesses, his voice level.

There's a tense pause, and Midoriya looks away first, seeming to recall the very first time they met on that rooftop as well. “Something like that.”

Do you really think I’ve grown so out of touch that I can’t tell when I’m being lied to? Especially when it comes to you? My boy, I practically invented lying to your teachers.

Toshinori doesn’t call him out on it, yet, however. “Well, does this *friend* know that hearing voices like that… may not be a very good sign?”

Midoriya falls back into the chair and pulls his knees to chest. “Yes.”

Unsure of what to do, Toshinori watches Midoriya while trying to decide the best course of action. Midoriya has practically already admitted to *hearing shit* that’s not there, which is not something anyone would want to hear from their ward. It makes Toshinori’s palms sweat and his heart race. It’s a good thing he took his medication today!

To fill the silence, Midoriya explains in a whisper. “He just, my friend, he… he thought…” He growls in frustration. “I thought I saw her. Shimura.”

Toshinori tries his very hardest to not show a reaction at that, but he must not do a good job, as Midoriya is quick to follow up.

“Er, imagined her, really! In my dream. I, uh, heard her, and—and felt her, too. It was so clear to me that I—I can’t think of it being anything other than real.” Midoriya holds onto a decorative pillow and squeezes it. “I’ve heard her a few times. And not just in my dreams. Sometimes, uh, sometimes I can hear her when I’m awake. And not

just her. The others… They talk to me too."

Toshinori, who is about to tumble off of a really tall cliff inside of his mind, barely manages to keep back a bloody cough. "The others?" He asks. "How long has this been going on for exactly?"

"I mean, I've kinda been hearing things forever, y'know, but it's only gotten this bad just recently. Like, I'd say, uh, a month ago? Maybe two?" Midoriya kneads the pillow even more, eyes darting back towards Toshinori at every other word.

What the fuck, Toshinori thinks to himself, now clinging onto the cliffside to put off his descent into the stormy waters below. He curses himself briefly for only skimming that book he bought off Amazon on parenting troubled teenage orphans—was there a chapter on this in there? Is this a regular thing actual parents have to deal with regarding their enhanced vigilante ward?

Shit. He needs to ask someone about this. At first, he assumed this was something denoting a mental illness, but now he's—now he's just unsure! What if he's going about this wrong? What if it's just a phase?

Is it *trauma?*

But the more Toshinori thinks about it, the more his gut tells him it's more than that. It has to be!

"I know this sounds weird, and I might just be, like, I don't know. Really tired or something and misremembering stuff, and it's okay if you don't believe me, but—"

"I believe you," Toshinori interrupts, surprising even himself.

Midoriya swivels his head around to stare at him, his face illuminated by the lights from the hologram. Patches of his hair in this setting look lighter than they really are, which makes Toshinori calm down, interestingly enough. Focusing on his successor and reminding himself of the role he's supposed to play for him always helps in grounding him.

Truthfully, Midoriya simply existing has helped Toshinori stay alive this past year.

"You do?" Midoriya asks, as if to make sure. As if he can't believe it at all.

Toshinori lets out a puff of air. “Why wouldn’t I? My master once told me we could meet each other again inside of One for All once we’ve passed. She always dreamed about it—said she was never scared of death precisely because she knew she’d never truly be gone.” Toshinori’s heart aches a little as he recalls her words. “If what you’re experiencing is *real*… maybe this could be what she meant.”

“So you don’t think I’m… *crazy* or something?”

The hushed words make Toshinori shake with laughter. “No, my boy. I don’t think you are.”

We’ll have to get this checked out. Just to be safe. But for now? I’d like to think this is what’s happening.

Toshinori hopes that Shimura Nana is watching over his successor. There’s no one else he’d rather have to guide Midoriya than his own master.

But with this calming thought comes another, more traitorous one. If this is indeed real and not just a product of Midoriya’s overactive mind… Why hasn’t Shimura come to see Toshinori more?

Why can Midoriya hear her, see her, and even touch her, but Toshinori can’t? He’s aware it’s selfish, but the pang in his stomach is still there, and it dampens his mood somewhat.

He figures he shouldn’t be too upset, however. Midoriya needs help, and Toshinori isn’t sure he’s been able to give him the kind he needs, so maybe this is why Shimura could possibly have manifested herself in Midoriya’s dreams.

She came to pick up Toshinori’s slack.

“She’s very beautiful,” Midoriya says out of the blue, gazing at the hologram with hazy eyes.

This successfully makes Toshinori forget about his qualms. “You’ve said that before.”

Midoriya hides his face in the pillow. “She has a really warm voice.”

Oh. For just a fraction of a second, Toshinori’s smile drops, his chest tightening. But then he’s moving and placing a light hand on Midoriya’s head, something soft settling over his skin to soothe the pain. “Yeah. She did have a very kind voice.”

When Midoriya doesn't answer back immediately, Toshinori decides to push his luck a little more. He has so many questions he wants to ask Midoriya about this, but he knows that now probably isn't the best time to interrogate him over it. So for now he's only going to ask the more pressing questions.

"When do you usually hear these voices? Are there any patterns you've noticed?"

Midoriya lifts up his shoulder and settles his chin on the pillow so he can be heard. "Not really. I hear them all the time. But when I'm awake, I think they like to comment on things that I'm seeing or thinking. Like, I don't just… hear random conversations, y'know? They're almost always talking about something I did or saw."

"They talk to each other, too?"

"Oh, yeah. A lot of times. It can get kinda annoying."

Toshinori can only imagine it. "And are they… nice to you? Those other ones you were talking about."

Midoriya goes quiet, face screwing up. Toshinori wonders what other horrors go on in his mind when he's alone. "Most of them."

Okay! That's pretty good news, right? There's that, at least! "I'm glad!" Toshinori exclaims.

The boy only nods, seemingly lost in thought again. His eyes have that solemn look to them, almost like he's dead, and Toshinori finds himself wincing. He hates seeing that expression on his ward's features. He's way too young to be looking like that already.

This prompts him to very slowly rest his hand on Midoriya's raised knee, just keeping it there as a hopefully comforting gesture. He remembers his own master doing this to him before. "Thank you for telling me about this, Young Midoriya. I… I know it's not so easy to tell people these sorts of things. So I'm very happy you decided to. Truly."

Midoriya makes an embarrassed sound before turning away from him. "It's fine. I, uh, figured it was time to tell someone."

Toshinori has to prepare himself for what he's about to say next. The thought has been stewing at the back of his mind for a large majority of the night since Midoriya came over, but this conversation has only

made it more pressing.

Yamada's rushed words over the phone come back to him: ' *Can you talk to him about Inui? I haven't managed to convince him yet, but I think you'd have a much better chance at it. He listens to most everything you say, Yagi. He wouldn't say no to you.'*

Truth be told, Toshinori didn't think Yamada was right. He doesn't see Midoriya being that way with him. Sure, Midoriya is generally on good behavior around him, but that doesn't mean he thinks Toshinori's word is law or anything! Hell, Toshinori can think of ten times just at the top of his head where Midoriya completely disregarded his teacher's opinions and suggestions during training. One hundred percent of those times resulted in Midoriya getting needlessly injured, but even that didn't make the boy too much more inclined to listen to him afterwards.

That's just the way Midoriya is. So what makes Yamada think he's going to listen to him?

Either way, Toshinori steels himself a little and hopes he doesn't sound unsure of the idea when he speaks. "My boy, I want you to go see Hound Dog soon."

Midoriya glances at him. "I don't—"

"I know you don't like doctors, but I assure you that Hound Dog is a little different. He's there for you. He specializes in child psychology, so I think it'll be very beneficial for you to see him. Even for just one session! Believe me, he's one of the nicest people I know."

"I already met him." Midoriya wrinkles his nose. "I… I wouldn't want to talk to him about my—my personal stuff."

Thought so.

If he were in Midoriya's shoes, he honestly wouldn't be up for it either, so how can Toshinori blame him? He can't.

Still, Toshinori knows how important this is, so he plows on. "I understand that. I do. But… listen to me for just a short moment, please. I'm sorry for putting this on you now, but it's not exactly up for debate. With what happened at Hosu… it's mandatory for the school to provide you with at least one session. Nezu has already signed the papers. We—Yamada and I—have just been putting it off for a little while in hopes of easing you into the topic, but… we can't

wait any longer."

If they wait, the legal people in charge of monitoring Midoriya's presence at UA will grow suspicious. They might take him away, since Midoriya being a ward of UA isn't technically set in stone yet. They're on a probationary period. If UA (or Midoriya, for that matter) slips up, the boy will be put into another home.

"I… I don't get a choice?" Midoriya asks.

Toshinori twists his body to look Midoriya in the eye. "I know this isn't really fair, but all you need to do is go to the session. You don't have to speak, you don't even have to stay for the full time, but you do need to go. Just to try it out. Can you do that?"

Midoriya goes back to picking at his skin, fingers running over the old scarred tissue running in jagged lines across his forearm. The faded burns from his apartment fire make the scars stand out even more.

"I've never been so fond of… telling people about my experiences either," Toshinori starts carefully, "but I've found that sometimes it can really help."

"I don't want help," Midoriya mumbles, but it sounds weak.

"Sometimes that's when we most need it."

This seems to do something for Midoriya, as then he's sighing and shuffling around in the chair. "Okay. When?"

Toshinori's heart leaps at the agreement, but he forces himself to calm down and not show his eagerness. "Now, you do have a choice here, at least. Hound Dog has a slot open this upcoming Wednesday or on Monday of next week. You can choose which is better."

He waits as long as his student needs to come to a decision. He's not going to rush him at all for something like this. It would just be wrong.

"I'd recommend not waiting too long," Toshinori tells him, though, his tone light. "You'll only dread it more if you wait longer."

"Wednesday, then," Midoriya says.

"Great. I'll make sure to set it up." He leans forward to try and catch Midoriya's gaze. "I'm very proud of you, my boy. You know that,

right?"

Midoriya fiddles with his hands and shakes his head, but his small smile betrays his words. "It's just a meeting."

"I'm not just talking about that." Toshinori inflates into his bigger form, putting his hands on his hips when he stands up tall. "I mean in general! You've come a long way from being that scroungy little boy I plucked from the grasp of that villain!"

"I wasn't *scroungy!"*

Toshinori coughs and deflates, stumbling back into his chair. "You very much were. Ask Aizawa, and I'm sure he'd say the same—"

The pillow is launched at Toshinori's head, and it's only by instinct that he manages to catch it and send it flying right back.

Midoriya throws himself behind the chair, trying to use it as a shield, but he's not quite fast enough. The pillow hits the back of his head with a loud *thump!* and sends the boy hurtling towards the floor.

The sound of Midoriya's body hitting the ground has Toshinori choking and scrambling to his feet. He skirts around the chairs so he can see what happened, and he sees Midoriya sprawled out on the ground, face down, with the pillow sitting off to the side. It has a slit going down the middle of it, exposing small feathers.

Shit! Toshinori threw it a little too hard. It must've split apart on impact!

"Oh, my boy, I didn't mean to—!"

"All Might," Midoriya says, voice slightly muffled against the ground.

Toshinori frowns and kneels beside, trying to covertly make sure there's no white matter oozing from his ears. "Yes?"

"There's one other thing. It's about One for All." The boy pauses and sighs before flipping himself onto his back. He doesn't make a move to get up, though. "Recovery Girl is making me tell you."

That's never a good sign. And *making?* What does that mean?

"What is it?" Toshinori prompts, hoping Midoriya can't hear the suspiciousness in his voice.

It's a little weird that he decided to tell him this now, of all times, but Toshinori isn't about to complain or tell him to stop. And if Midoriya feels more comfortable talking about this on the floor, well, so be it.

And so Toshinori sits there and listens, with horror settling into his gut, as his ward talks about his most recent blood results.

Chapter End Notes

all might quite literally knocked some sense into him.

up next? another chat with AM and an inch resting dinner with some pro heroes 😏 izuku's luck strikes again.

w

meet my monsters

Chapter Notes

> kinda short cuz I had to push a few scenes to next chap! very sry! next chap will have more action :(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They say that love is the cruelest poison of them all. It seeps through the cracks in your bones and squeezes your heart until it stops beating, driving away all rational thought and voice of reason. They say it kills you slowly, like a parasite sucking at the back of your neck every night underneath your pillow: silent, slow, and deadly.

Midoriya Inko, however, disagrees.

Love can be cruel, sure. But it's not the cruelest. Love was never the *cruelest* thing to happen to her.

Hate was.

You may argue that love and hate aren't all that different from each other, but to Inko, there couldn't have been two more opposite things in her life.

Hate for her was her own naivety. Hate for her was her failures. Hate for her was that *quirk*.

She sits at a steel bench somewhere inside the city in the far parts of southern Japan, throwing oats onto the ground for the birds to eat.

At night, the park pigeons are her best distraction. Unraveling the pecking order can be all-consuming to Inko.

The red one is alpha, as he's hogging most of the food and bullying the others away with his large size. Yellow speckles seems to be next, since it's obvious he doesn't have a problem with continuously challenging the red one. And the poor little green-footed pigeon is clearly low on the list, as he's barely eating at all.

Inko throws more in his direction, using her shoe to ward off the other two dueling pigeons.

It's not a particularly nice night, as it's cold and dark and overall

damp, but she prefers it like this. She enjoys the smell of the oncoming rain, and she likes to hear the disgruntled murmurs of the crowds of people in the distance on their way back home from work. It makes her feel whole again.

Something she hasn't been in what seems like ever.

Another pigeon joins the trio, this one all black with a gray neck, and she watches with minor curiosity to see what this will do to the unspoken hierarchy.

Red immediately goes for the bodyslam, but the little green pigeon is the one to stand up for the newcomer this time. He pecks the red pigeon in the throat one good time, and that seems to resolve the issue.

The order is maintained, but there's less bullying now.

Inko smiles and wishes all of life could work that way.

Watching the environment around her is something she had to learn to enjoy. When she was younger, she didn't care much for the little things. She wasn't into the bird-watching or people-observing thing. She found it weird, honestly. But now—upon her therapist's instruction—she finds that maybe it does help.

And maybe she does like it.

The truth is, if she's left alone for too long with nothing else *living* around her, she becomes… unsure again. She sees things. She hears them.

She doesn't like not knowing if those things are real or not. She dealt with that every day for years, and she doesn't want to go back.

At least the pigeons are real. She likes that they're brightly colored. Most pigeons are like that nowadays, as mutant and transformation powers seemed to affect them the most when quirks first started developing. They've evolved into something even more beautiful. Inko doesn't know how she didn't see it back then.

Late night joggers pass by and laugh at her kindly, and people with children walk and coo at the growing number of birds by Inko's feet.

She doesn't look at the parents. She never does.

When the moon rises higher into the sky and droplets of rain soak into her skin, Inko takes out her umbrella and walks the lengths of the city. She always takes the long way home.

As she makes towards her place, she can't help but remember the day things finally started to change for the better.

"You have a poison inside of you. I can sense it, ma'am. It's strong."

Inko grips the edges of her skirt tightly, knuckles going white. A poison, she thinks, mind numb. Something real. Something not fake.

"It's obvious to me that you have been experiencing the effects of a quirk for over five years now. I can feel it occupying the space where a quirk would normally be felt by me."

Like grease left over on an emptied pan.

"But I don't have a quirk," Inko says, confused and maybe a little scared. "So how is that possible?"

The woman takes off her glasses, breathes onto them, and wipes them down on her coat. "It's rare, but some quirks allow their users to impart long lasting effects on their victims if they use it on another person. It's entirely possible that someone may have used theirs on you, whether maliciously or not, and caused this to happen. Yes, even over the span of years."

Inko hears the words but doesn't truly process them immediately. She's busy remembering all of the creatures she had to grow accustomed to over the years. Some of them were even given names.

"From what you've described to me, it seems to have flare ups. You said it was worse a few years ago?"

"Yes," she answers, tongue feeling like sandpaper. "Before I moved away from my hometown."

She gets a nod in reply. "So perhaps it grew worse when you were around a certain someone, or even something. Having thoughts about those things may also amplify the symptoms."

Is that why it got weaker when Inko left?

The intake of breath before she speaks next feels like an important one. "Can you fix it?"

The woman nods quickly, as if wondering why she even asked. "Of course! It's an easy enough thing to handle for us here at QR&R, so don't worry about that. But I won't lie to you, it will be difficult to start living again once you've figured this out. The residue of this quirk… it has been a part of you for a while now. Losing it will put you in a fragile spot, mentally and physically, I reckon. But this is needed. I can tell just by looking at you."

Inko nods numbly, eyes already beginning to overflow with silent tears. So, all of that time with her son, all of those terror-filled nights and dark shadows… it was never real? None of it? He never hurt her? The monsters never actually attacked?

Was it really just all in her head? No, it can't be. How much of it could've been true? How much of it wasn't?

How much did she think was true?

Inko feels sick and yet surprisingly happier than she's ever been before. The idea that it wasn't her, it wasn't her just seeing things or being haunted or going crazy… it makes her hopeful.

And yet with that excitement comes the dawning horror. The tears come out faster, burning her cheeks and dripping down onto her hands.

She hurt him. Over and over again. And what she was seeing back then might not have even been real. She was hurting him while trying to protect him, but now it seems there was nothing she needed to protect him from anyway.

She was hurting him just to hurt.

The woman gently takes her hand in her own, looking into her eyes with a face filled with understanding and kindness that Inko doesn't think she deserves. "Quirks can be a curse just as much as they can be a blessing. There are some dark powers out there, and I fear you were the victim to one of them. I'm sorry you've lost things because of it, but I'm certain that now you can start over."

Lost things? Is that what happened to Inko? To her, it felt like something much worse. She didn't just lose something. She lost herself, and she lost her baby.

"You can live again," comes the next declaration, and it makes Inko's head spin.

Live. Inko can live. It's such a weird notion.

Unfamiliar. Dangerous. Even impossible.

Inko survived with her son. She never lived. And now that she doesn't have him, she doesn't know if she should even get that second chance.

Why should she when she took away her son's chance from the very start?

"Recovery is a slow process," the woman starts, squeezing her hand before pulling away, "but we can begin with identifying the real and not real from back then."

Inko will never regret loving her son. Her love for him, though broken, wasn't the worst poison inside of her, no.

Her insensible, volatile hatred for him in the end was.

That's the only thing she truly regrets.

"You're telling me…"

Izuku rolls his eyes at Yagi's disbelieving tone and turns away, crossing his arms. *Here we go again.*

"…that Chiyo thinks One for All is *killing* you."

Raising up a finger, Izuku wags it at Yagi. "Not kill! I'm not dying! What I said is that she thinks it's making me *sick.* Those are two very different things."

Yagi pauses what he's doing and puts his hands together in a sort of prayer. "Oh, God," he says quietly, closing his eyes. "How is that even possible? How is—why is that even—?"

"It's not possible, which is why I'm telling you it's not true. Chiyo is off her rockers."

"Hey. Watch how you speak of her, young man. I trust she knows what she's talking about better than you do."

“It’s *my* body,” Izuku argues, hopping off of the arm of the chair in the living room and walking towards him. He’s getting frustrated now only because they’ve been over this already. All Might just doesn’t seem to want to let it go. “I told her that my blood has been like that since—since forever. Even before One for All! It has nothing to do with—”

“One for All could have made things worse for you still,” Yagi points out, “which, based on what I’ve been monitoring of you lately, doesn’t seem unlikely.”

“Monitoring? You’ve been *monitoring* me?”

Yagi turns to him, holding the sheets he’s using for the blanket fort Izuku proposed they do in his bony hands. “You’re not well, Midoriya. That’s obvious.”

“Yeah, I know! But that has—it’s—One for All hasn’t done anything to me that hasn’t already been done, All Might! I know because it’s *me*. I’ve had to live like this! I know what’s hurting me and what isn’t!”

“So if it isn’t One for All, what is it?”

Izuku huffs at him. “Nothing. My quirk is just always a little unstable this time of year.”

“My boy, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sir, the only reason I told you is because she said she’d tell you herself if I didn’t. And I—I just didn’t want her to, like, freak you out.”

“You’re telling me that your blood is undergoing a process that shouldn’t be possible, Midoriya. It’s a little hard to not be freaked out by that.”

Izuku hugs himself tightly and screws up his face. “This is why I said we should make the blanket fort before I told you. It was supposed to make you not mad.”

“I’m not mad, I’m just…” Yagi lets a soft breath pass between his teeth. “I’m upset.”

“I feel like I should be the one upset here, not you.”

“You hush up,” All Might retorts, throwing a half-hearted glare at him. “I cannot believe you didn’t tell me sooner about this. What were you

thinking, keeping it from me?"

Izuku puffs up his cheeks and turns away. "Like I said, it's not true, so I didn't see the point. But I'm telling you now, anyway, so you still shouldn't be upset."

All Might sighs in frustration and fastens the next blanket with a clip, muttering to himself. "What would my master say if she were here? She'd smack you for being so foolish—and then me for not noticing it sooner."

He's right, Shimura says, almost smugly.

Izuku shivers at the thought. *Remind me to stay away from you the next time I visit One for All.*

"And Gran!" Yagi shudders visibly, face as white as the sheets in his hand. "I can only imagine what he'll do once we tell him—"

"What!" Izuku screeches. "We can't tell him about this! None of it!"

What if he makes the connection? He's already suspicious of me; I can feel it every time I'm around him! He's going to find me out if he hears all of this!

"Young Midoriya," Yagi says gravely, garnering his attention and ignoring his protest altogether. "If you have been like this for a long time, why hasn't it been fixed yet? Did you not receive treatment?"

Izuku almost laughs at the thought. "It's not something to fix, All Might. It's just how Boost works. For my body to be enhanced like it is, my DNA has to constantly… rewrite itself, if that makes sense."

"No, it doesn't make sense. That's not—"

"My father tried," Izuku admits, staring somewhere behind Yagi. "To see what could be done, I mean. But he… he had the same condition. It's *normal* for us. He's living a long life, too." An extremely fucking long one. "So it's… it's not like One for All is going to do anything bad to me. If anything, it's been helping. I'm *fine.* Really!"

"You told me Chiyo said there's no way this could be happening without some kind of harm coming to you. So what you're saying cannot be true."

"What does it matter? Even if it's hurting me, what's to be done?

Father, he—he could never fix himself. And he couldn't fix me, either. So there's really nothing to be done."

Yagi lowers his head to catch his gaze. "I'm sure we have more resources now. We can take you to the best centers in the world to get you treated and—"

"My father *had* the best resource," Izuku says through gritted teeth, fists clenching. He remembers studded goggles and a white coat with a dark mustache to go with it. He thinks of tubes stuck under his skin and electrodes attached to every spare inch of his chest and stomach. "Yagi, it's fine. *I'm* fine. This is just a flare up. It happens sometimes! I'll get better soon. Really soon."

For a few moments, Yagi searches Izuku's face with sharp, calculating eyes. Izuku resolutely avoids the hard gaze, much preferring to count the number of quirks he can feel in the building at this very second. Now he regrets ever telling Yagi about what Recovery Girl said. He knew, obviously, that he wouldn't take it well, but Izuku had kind of hoped he would believe him a little more!

Of course he doesn't believe you, En says. *You're lying straight to his face. He isn't blind.*

Izuku's frustration boils over. *Did I ask for your input?*

The calm reply comes immediately. *No. But you're getting it anyway. Cope, Ninth.*

"My boy, I—"

"Can we finish the fort, please? It looks sloppy."

Yagi shakes his head and drops the sheet he's holding. "No, we cannot. As a matter of fact, sit down." He points to the end of the large L-shaped couch, tone brooking no room for argument.

Izuku obeys, but not without a loud, annoyed huff first.

Yagi walks over and pulls a loveseat with him so he can sit in front of Izuku. He's a few feet away from Izuku now, but it's still too close. He doesn't like it.

"Is this an intervention or something?" Izuku grumbles, glaring to the side at the stacks of blankets they still haven't used yet.

“It should be,” Yagi retorts. His bones creak when he shifts, but Izuku has the good sense not to make a joke about it now. “We’re not doing anything until we talk about this. That’s what you said you came here for, right? So, let’s talk. As… openly and truthfully as possible.”

“You can’t use my own words against me. That’s unfair.”

“What’s unfair is you continuously dodging my questions and deflecting when I ask you something. This is a serious issue, and I don’t appreciate you making a joke out of it. You could be *dying*. I know you may not care, but we—”

“I already said One for All is not—”

“You could be wrong. I know you hate having to hear that, my boy, but it’s the truth.” He leans forward and pushes on Izuku’s forehead with a finger until he’s looking at him again. “You need to get that through that thick skull of yours. And quickly.”

Izuku ducks away from his hand. “This is literally a time where I *am* right, though. I’m not lying!”

“I didn’t say you were lying, what I—”

“That doesn’t matter,” Izuku says hotly, feeling that irritation from before come back with a swift vengeance, clouding his senses. “I’m not stupid.”

“Now, I didn’t say that either. You need to—”

“You didn’t *have* to say it,” Izuku counters, glaring accusingly. “You know, you’re acting just like Aizawa did after my apartment blew up, Yagi.”

Immediately, his mentor’s eyebrows fly to his hairline. “Excuse me?” He asks, tone shifting into something dangerous. “And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

There’s a stir inside of One for All. *Izuku,* Shimura chides, matching her successor’s voice.

Listening to the warning for once, Izuku bites his tongue hard. He hates having conversations like this, and while he knows he technically asked for it, it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with. The walls are closing in on him. He doesn’t like this at all! Yagi needs to stop talking. Right now, preferably.

“That wasn’t rhetorical,” All Might tells him, folding his arms and straightening his back. “Answer me.”

Heat soaks into Izuku’s skin, and he rubs his arms to get rid of the burning sensation. “Nothing. It didn’t mean anything.”

“Right,” Yagi says flatly. “Maybe we should be having this conversation with your other teachers here then if—”

“No!” Izuku shouts, nearly shooting up from his spot on the couch. “No, no! We don’t need to do that!”

“You said this wasn’t a huge deal, yes? So it shouldn’t matter if Aizawa or Yamada knows.”

Bastard!

Izuku shakes his head rapidly. “It’s *not* a big deal! But they—they’re gonna be even more dramatic about this! Then I’ll—I’ll probably never be able to go out as—” His jaw clicks shut at the realization of what he was about to say. His heart drops, and the walls are even closer now.

Yagi doesn’t seem the least bit surprised though. His blue eyes are as keen as ever. “As what?”

Izuku doesn’t say one word, but he doesn’t have to.

All Might takes in Izuku’s appearance—his clenched fists resting on his thighs, his thin lips and shadowed expression—and swipes a hand down his face. “Young Midoriya. The fact that you think telling your teachers about this medical issue will make them bench you from partaking in those life-threatening activities is already a telling sign.”

You don’t get it, Izuku wants to say, a decade of practiced lies hiding beneath his tongue and even more empty promises stapled to the roof of his mouth. *It’s not like that. You just don’t see it.*

“I’m already benched,” Izuku says sullenly, drilling holes into the fabric of his pants with his eyes.

“Good. You severely need this break.”

Izuku flinches. Yagi might not see it as an insult, but to Izuku it very much was. Saying he needs a break is insinuating that Izuku can’t handle his own shit. It implies that he’s too weak to do what he’s been

training to do since he was seven years old.

“I’m just sick right now because I pushed myself a lot during Hosu,” he admits softly after a while. “I didn’t realize it then, but I did. That’s it, though. I’ll heal, just like always! It just… it takes a while sometimes.”

I need to give my body more time to deal with all those quirks.

Yagi taps his clenched fists, and it might just be Izuku, but his mentor suddenly looks more unsure than he ever has before. His following words are awkward, though the genuineness behind them makes up for it. “I’m not calling you weak, or defenseless, or incapable. Nothing like that, kid. But as I’ve told you time and time again, it’s important to take care of *you.* The world’s not going to crumble in the few days you’re absent from your vigilantism or—or whatever else it is you teenagers do these days. You shouldn’t have to be shouldering all of this by yourself. You can let others carry the weight.”

That’s exactly what Yamada told him, isn’t it? If both of them are saying it, it has to be true, doesn’t it? It’s only logical.

“I only wish you would’ve confided in me about this sooner,” Yagi says, “but I understand why you waited. In the future, I need you to trust that I can help you with these things. I don’t claim to be perfect, or to automatically know what needs to be done in every situation that arises, but what I do know is that it’s always better to take things on as a team.”

“You don’t work with a team, though,” Izuku points out.

“My agency of a couple hundred says otherwise.” He punches Izuku gently in the arm. “As do you.”

We’re a team?

Izuku’s brows furrow as he thinks about it. Somehow he’s not upset at the notion. He’s… happy. In a weird kind of way, of course.

“You know I can’t just let this go, right?” Despite the gentle way he asks it, he doesn’t sound apologetic. “I’m going to talk to Chiyo more about this, and hopefully we can find some options out there to get a sense of what this all means.”

“It doesn’t mean anything like what—”

“Nothing you say is going to deter me, my boy. Your health is my top priority, even if it’s not your own priority. Do you understand?”

Izuku hates that Yagi always asks that. Scratch that—they *all* say that. Yamada, Aizawa, and Yagi all ask if he understands. They don’t ask if he agrees or accepts it, of course. They know he would object. But by asking if he understands what they’re saying, they’re not giving Izuku the option to opt out of it.

So Izuku nods even though he’s unhappy about it. He’d be lying if he says some part of himself doesn’t light up at the way Yagi smiles brightly at him because of it.

Yagi slaps his palms on his knees, as if ending the conversation there. “Alright! Back to working on the structural integrity of this fort.”

Izuku doesn’t get up from the couch immediately. He watches Yagi stand and pick up the discarded blankets and clips, and it’s only when the man turns to him with an expectant eyebrow that he speaks.

“You’re not going to tell them about it, right?” He swallows back the shame on his tongue when he asks.

“About what?”

“One for all. And what Chiyo said.”

For a moment, All Might is completely unreadable for Izuku. He can’t sense any conflicting emotions, nor see any change in his expression. He’s probably trying not to show anything, Izuku realizes.

“No,” Yagi says after a minute, clipping a thick sheet onto the counter and pulling it to the dining table. “One for All is your quirk now as well as it is mine. I won’t tell them anything without you knowing, at least as long as it’s not detrimental. Besides, I fear they’re both going to kick my ass if they find out I gave you such a dangerous quirk and didn’t tell them.”

Izuku cracks a smile, figuring that that’s most definitely going to be the case.

“But we will eventually have to tell them in the future, so just… work with me for now. And we’ll be alright until then. How does that sound?”

“I can do *future,”* Izuku says, walking up to him to help.

“As can I.” Suddenly, All Might inflates into his bigger form with a bloody cough, a wide grin on his face. “But I didn’t forget what you said about Aizawa, young man! I’ll be telling him, rest assured!”

Izuku is never one to let a threat slide, even if it’s a childish one, so—naturally—he fires up One for All, spins on his heel, and aims a powerful kick at the number one hero.

Snitches should be eradicated.

“I remember blanket forts being much smaller back in my day.”

Izuku turns his head towards Yagi, who is all the way on the other end of the floor where the tunnel to the fort begins. “That’s because you guys lacked creativity and drive. You all missed out on true fun.”

“I didn’t even know I had this many sheets and blankets,” Yagi grunts, making his way over slowly to where Izuku is.

Izuku figures it’s not a good time to tell him that he actually didn’t have this much; he took it upon himself to use Pull to snatch some clean sheets from the bottom of the bedding chute.

And can you believe that? The billionaires in this skyscraper don’t even have to do their own laundry! They just put their dirty laundry or bedding down the chute and in an hour or so the clean clothing will shoot back up in a different tube.

Izuku doesn’t consider what he did stealing, though. The people living in this place are rich enough to not realize a few sheets are missing, surely.

While the fort they made is extremely large in the sense that it spans nearly the entire length of the floor, it’s not very tall. It’s only around four and a half feet in height in the tallest spots, which means the both of them have to either crawl or waddle to get around.

They left a big open overhang in the fort so that they can watch some television on the large hologram in the living room, and there’s enough airflow to ensure it’s not hot at all.

Overall, it's an incredible, strategic build. Izuku's experience with having to reinforce his old building's walls and floors so he wouldn't die in the middle of the night due to a collapse has really helped him with structural integrity and design.

Izuku chews on leftover popcorn and yawns with his mouth full, nearly choking on a kernel. It's getting pretty late, and dark clouds are hanging low in the sky now, blocking their view of the city from the window. It takes strength to open his eyes again every time he blinks, and his limbs become even heavier to move. He leans his head back against the multitude of pillows beneath him and then curls up against the blankets he took from the other residents of the building.

To his surprise, Yagi hasn't left him to go to his bedroom yet. Rather, he's made his own makeshift bed of sheets and comforters a little ways away. At least his back won't suffer because of this, Izuku thinks.

Yagi chose a spot closer to the wall, and Izuku finds out why when he sees what the man brought into the fort: A night light is plugged into the wall, and immediately the blankets above them are lit up with stars and swirling galaxies.

Izuku can't help the gasp this tears from him. He leans back even more, eyes blowing wide as he takes it all in. The colors are neon and cloud-like, and the stars are twinkling like actual burning balls of gas. He didn't expect the night light to be so… *realistic!* It's like the one Yamada brought out that night, except this one is much better!

It's as if he could reach up and touch the stars and feel the heat from them on his fingertips. He almost wishes it were possible.

"Woah," Izuku breathes, following the rippling universes as they move alongside each other. "I didn't know you liked night lights, All Might."

"I like to have it with me on the rare nights I can actually sleep in. I find that I don't like not having it on."

At this, Izuku turns on his side to stare at him, cheek squished against his pillow. "You're afraid of the dark?" He whispers, and it's childish, the way he asks it, as if he can't believe it. As if he wouldn't have thought it even possible.

All Might, the Symbol of Peace, the literal pillar of Justice—scared of the dark? No, no. *Normal* people can be afraid. But Yagi?

When Izuku was little, he used to think the word *scared* was simply not in All Might's vocabulary. He still kind of does.

"Not afraid," Yagi responds, but he doesn't say it defensively. His words are soft, as if he wouldn't be ashamed of the idea if it were true. As if he wouldn't be afraid to admit it aloud if so. Something about that makes Izuku feel better about himself, though he'll never admit it aloud. "I just don't like being alone with myself sometimes. The stars help, I think. They ground me. They remind me that we're all under the same sky, no matter where we are or what stage of life we're at. Our predecessors have grown and lived under the same constellations as us, and our own successors will do just the same."

All Might sighs and visibly relaxes as he lets himself sink into the blankets. The vibrant stars reflect in his shadowed eyes.

Izuku wonders briefly if that's how bright his eyes used to shine before everything that happened to him.

"We all face our own troubles," Yagi continues. "But the sky reminds us we're never truly alone."

Izuku frowns to himself. His teacher sounds practiced. Like he's reciting it from somewhere. The boy is willing to bet this was probably Shimura's doing sometime long ago.

Thinking of a situation where maybe Yagi was in his same position once, Izuku rolls over to face the stars again. "I like that," he says. "Thanks."

"Of course," comes Yagi's warm reply.

Huh. Maybe Izuku will ask Yamada if he can have one of these to put in his room.

Suits aren't really Izuku's thing.

They're tight, heavy, and overall not really a good outfit to fight crime in. Plus, they're extremely expensive. Horrifically expensive. The kind of expensive that should put suit-makers in prison for fifteen years.

That kind of expensive.

Izuku stares at the price tag on the suit. He blinks once, twice, and then rubs his eyes.

“Yagi,” he whispers loudly, calling the man over. “There has to be a mistake. Look at the price tag.”

The number one hero trudges over to him and frowns. “Oh, this one looks nice. It would look great on you.”

“Yagi. The *price.”*

All Might smiles widely. “Wow! It’s on clearance. If you want that one to try on, go right ahead and ask to have someone fit it for you. You can keep looking at the others, though. You don’t have to get the cheapest one, y’know.”

Sometimes it’s hard for Izuku to remember that they’re both in two very different tax brackets. Now is not one of those times.

“Daddy, look!” A little girl bounces around excitedly upon seeing the two of them. “It’s *All Might!”*

Yagi hunches over immediately. *“Shit,”* he hisses.

Izuku snorts and walks away from him. “This is why you shouldn’t go around in your big form.”

“I need a new suit, too, so I have to show them my measurements—ah, hello, there!” All Might whips around with a wide smile to greet the little girl, who ran up to him with a book and pen in hand.

Her father rushes after her, looking apologetic. “Hey, what did I tell you about interrupting people when they’re—”

Izuku tunes out the rest, only keeping an ear out for any danger. He browses the suits on display for people his size and finds that he hates everything he sees.

The fabric is either too scratchy and uncomfortable to the touch, or it’s just ugly. Honestly, even Izuku has standards! He may not care about how he looks, but if he’s going to some fancy restaurant with All Might and *Endeavor,* he needs to look classy at least. On the off chance that a reporter finds them (Izuku is praying they won’t), he doesn’t want to embarrass his teacher by looking—how did that one

third year student say it?— *scrunkly*.

He sees a white one with golden embroidery and then another with red accents. He likes the red, but not the white. Are you supposed to wear white suits to restaurants? Or is that only for weddings?

Does he stick with the unoriginal black suit? Does he wear an office tie or a bow tie?

Izuku chews on his lip and tries to remember the suits his father used to wear. He always wore the same tie, but his suits differed occasionally. He never wore white, though.

That's probably because the blood would show up more clearly, but Izuku doesn't want to think that far.

"Okay," he mutters. "No white. Black is a maybe. What about… velvet green? No, it'll be too hot." He circles around the store to the suit he was first looking at. It's still the cheapest in the entire building, so that's already a plus in his book.

He runs his finger along it and likes the texture. It's not unbearable. It's a simple black suit with dark red accents. Actually, it almost reminds Izuku of his lightning whenever he uses One for All.

The red runs from the blazer all the way down to the pant legs, creating jagged patterns that accentuate how it will look fitted on Izuku. When Izuku moves around it, he notices that roses pop up on the fabric. When the light hits it right, it looks as if the vines around the roses are moving.

Izuku wonders how the manufacturer did it. Maybe he could do something similar with his Rabbit costume!

"Well," All Might says from behind. He sounds out of breath. Izuku reckons the girl asked him a shit ton of questions. "Did you find anything else?"

"No." He touches the fabric again. "Are you sure we can't just rent a suit? I don't need one to just have."

"Nonsense! Everyone needs a nice suit for special occasions. Besides, you'll need to get used to wearing one. As a hero, you'll be doing lots of conferences."

"Aizawa never does any."

“Only because reporters are usually scared of him.”

Izuku figures that’s fair. He’s about to ask Yagi what he thinks about the roses, but when he turns, the man is beckoning a worker over and asking him to help fit it to Izuku.

This is going to be a long day.

Izuku reads the latest text Dragon Lady sent him and beams, typing out his reply with quick fingers. ***Thanks, again. Truly.***

She answers immediately. ***Do I want to ask why you wanted me to do this on such late notice?***

It’s a bird trap.

I figured that much. But what makes you think the weapons you made me spread around are going to damage Hawks even a little bit?

They won’t. But they’re not supposed to.

She sends a sarcastic thinking emoji next. ***Somehow that doesn’t make sense. Also, why did you choose this warehouse?***

Because that’s where he brought me before. When I eventually get Hawks’ attention while I’m on patrol in the next week or so, that’s where I’ll lead him.

A link to an online funeral planning service is the only thing he receives in response, not that he expected anything else from her.

Early this morning, before All Might even woke up, Izuku asked her to do him a favor. And that favor was to bring some of Izuku’s old, specialty weapons from the safe houses he used to share with her to the abandoned warehouse Hawks dropped him in that night.

He told her exactly where to place the weapons and traps, how to manipulate the environment to be as anti-Hawks as possible, and also how to hide the weapons so curious civilians won’t get their hands on them.

Yeah. Izuku did a lot of research on the schematics of that old building.

Izuku is extremely grateful she decided to help out. He knows she's busy right now with everything that's recently been happening, so he's grateful she took precious time out of her day to help.

He doesn't plan to do anything rash yet. He has to wait until he has a good opportunity to somehow get Hawks' attention and lead him to the trap. Hawks has unpredictable schedules, though, and so does Izuku now, so that will prove to be hard to do. He may not have the chance to do anything for a few weeks.

"Nervous?" Yagi asks. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel of his car and adjusts the rear view mirror.

When Izuku saw that Yagi owned a million dollar car, he nearly shit himself. He's only ever seen the old American car Yagi usually drives to UA and back. Izuku didn't know he had multiple cars, much less *this* beast.

It looks like the fucking Batmobile!

"Not really," Izuku says, staring out the window and putting his phone in his suit jacket.

"You're not? You're better than me, then."

Izuku glances at him. "You're the number one hero. You could take Endeavor easily in a fight, so why are you nervous?"

All Might hums lowly. "My boy, strength isn't everything."

"Okay," Izuku concedes. "But you're still smarter than him."

This gets a fond roll of the eye from him. "I appreciate your confidence, but you shouldn't underestimate Endeavor. He is where he is because he worked for it. That counts for something."

"You should challenge each other in a sword fight. No quirks."

Yagi laughs. "He'd kill me for sure."

"I wouldn't let him. But even if he could, I'd avenge you. Just ask and I'll kill him for you. Well, try to. I'm good with swords."

"You shouldn't say things like that, Young Midoriya."

“Why? I mean it.”

Yagi only sighs and shakes his head. “We’re supposed to be cordial. It’s a friendly dinner, not a death match. Please don’t be so liberal with handing out such challenges. Villains will see that as an invitation to take you on. You’ll be swarmed before you know it.”

“Maybe I want that,” Izuku jokes.

“If I weren’t currently driving I’d smack you for that.”

“You can’t touch me. I’m wearing a nice suit. It’s illegal to hit someone wearing an expensive suit.”

“My boy, didn’t you used to steal from people wearing expensive suits?”

Izuku huffs. “That was literally so long ago. I haven’t done that in, like, weeks.”

“Uh-huh.”

When they pull into the restaurant, there’s barely anyone in the line. Izuku figures that only the richest of the rich go here. That’s the only reason it could be so barren.

They stop at the very front of the restaurant in the middle of the road, but before Izuku can get out, a security guard is opening the car door for him and welcoming him. Izuku looks back at Yagi, who is already out of the car and handing the keys to a boy with a big hat. *What the fuck.*

“All Might,” the security guard greets. “It’s a pleasure to see you here. You’re the first of your party to arrive, but you’ll find that your seats are already ready for you.”

“Great!” Yagi clasps his hands together and walks around the car to lead Izuku in. In a lower voice so only Izuku can hear, he adds, “I bet Endeavor is going to skip. He didn’t look too happy at our meeting a couple of hours ago.”

Izuku was left at Yagi’s apartment for a little bit of time to explore while the man attended his meeting. All Izuku did to pass the time was stand on the balcony, make his way to the roof while blindfolded, and use Yagi’s gym. All on a repeated cycle!

He still wishes he could've been able to spy on the top-secret meeting, but he guesses he probably would have been murdered if he were caught, so maybe it was a good thing he didn't go.

Izuku keeps close to All Might as they walk inside and make for their reserved seating. The people in this restaurant just scream wealthy, and Izuku doesn't know why, but he's immediately intimidated. Their quirks don't feel like anything special, but it's just their *aura* that's making him shiver.

They feel like backstabbing cretins, and maybe he's generalizing them, but still. He should remain on guard here.

It turns out that they have their own little room to themselves with a wine wall, pool table, and soda machine. In one corner is also a salad and fruit bar.

Izuku tips his head. "I didn't think these kinds of places had pool and soda."

Yagi waves off the hostess and allows him to shut the crystal double doors to their private room. "I'll tell you a secret, Young Midoriya. The more wealthy the person is, the less they care about their image. Billionaires don't care about 'acting' rich, I can assure you. The uber rich aren't the ones you can pick out from a crowd. They choose to blend in nicely."

"So you're telling me I could've gone for poorer looking civilians while stealing and hit the jackpot with a trillionaire?"

All Might snorts. "That probably wouldn't have been the best thing to do, so no."

"I've gotta test the theory out."

It's a big table, if Izuku is being honest.

It's a normal rectangular table, with enough room for two chairs at each of the head spots and three on both of the longer sides. There's silverware and plates already set out, along with wine glasses.

"Why are there ten seats if there's only going to be three of us?"

"I figure the Commission wanted to make sure there was enough space between Endeavor and I," Yagi responds with a nervous laugh.

Izuku tips his head. “So they all know you both hate each other?”

“I don’t hate Endeavor, my boy.”

“So they know *Endeavor* hates *you?”*

“Well, he doesn’t exactly make it a secret. Why don’t we sit down?”

Izuku shakes his head and walks over to the pool table. “If Endeavor isn’t here, why should we? We could start a game!” He throws a glance over his shoulder at All Might, who is pulling out a chair at one of the head spots and already sitting down. In the light of the room, Izuku can just barely see the white steam coming off of him. “Nevermind.”

It’s obvious All Might is trying to not do anything too strenuous. He’s been in his big form for around thirty minutes already today, and he has to sit through this dinner too.

Izuku picks up the pool stick and runs his finger along it. “Are you sure this is a good idea? How much longer do you have?”

All Might fixes his bowtie in the reflection of the wine glass. “You know that when I’m fighting, I can usually only do thirty minutes at a time. But I’ve been trying to see how much farther I can go when not straining. I can hold my form like this for a few hours.”

“That’s good! But, like, *still.”* He gives the man a solemn salute. “If you feel like you need to leave, just nudge me or something, sensei. I’ll throw up so we can go. I can do it on command.”

“That’s… alarming.”

“Aizawa said it’s a good skill.”

Yagi seems to consider it now that he’s heard his coworker’s opinion on it. “I see. Then I’ll keep that in mind.”

Leaving his mentor to his own thoughts, Izuku tries to remember what he knows about playing pool. He was too poor to ever go to places that had it with his mother, but he was too rich to see it while with his father. All for One called it a poor man’s game, so he never allowed Izuku to play.

Izuku takes the triangle barrier off of the balls and sets himself up to start. When he stretches out his arms, he wishes again that he wasn’t

wearing this stupid suit. While he does think this one is kinda pretty, it's still tight. He should probably take off his jacket and—

"My boy, wait! This isn't regular *pool—!"*

It's a second too late, as Izuku has already hit the first ball with a jab of the stick and sent it flying. Instead of hitting the bunch of other balls, it instead goes over them and *launches* off of the table—right toward the glass doors.

All Might is out of his seat in a flash, trying to catch it, and Izuku has his palm raised instinctively with Pull on his fingertips, but the ball moves impossibly faster than both of them.

In less than half a second, it's crashing right through one of the doors and sending glass shattering everywhere.

Izuku freezes, stomach dropping to his ass.

Oh. My. God.

For a moment, neither of them say anything, but then All Might turns, very slowly, to stare at Izuku, who shrinks in on himself.

"I swear," Izuku begins, voice cracking already, "that I didn't even use my quirks."

All Might just covers his own eyes with his palm.

Chapter End Notes

> i find that growing up is depressing. i just watched the new avatar movie and nothing is as i expected it
>
> QR&R-quirk reformation and response: a community group that extended worldwide that helps those with quirk related mental issues. mostly for those whose quirks have harmed them beyond what 'normal' therapy can help
>
> s

fool's fire

Chapter Notes

fight fight fight fight

very sry it's been a while! merry late christmas and happy New Years!! and happy Hanukkah :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There's no need for that, really," a waitress assures Izuku. "This happens a lot more than you think. Most people haven't played assisted pool before, so we expect these things to happen."

All Might pulls Izuku up by the collar from the floor, stopping his dramatic, incessant bowing and apologies. "Still, I'm very sorry. Allow us to clean it up!" Yagi says.

"Don't worry about that, sir. I have it handled." Saying this, the woman bends down and touches one of the bigger pieces of glass, and with a flick of her wrist, all of the shards are flying up and piecing themselves together. In just a few seconds, the door is back in working order as if nothing ever happened.

"What the *fuck,"* Izuku whispers, eyes wide.

All Might clasps his hand over Izuku's mouth and laughs loudly. "Excuse him, please! He's never been to a place like this before."

Izuku fights back the urge to lick All Might's palm. He would do that to Kacchan with no hesitation to get him to remove his hand, but that's just weird with All Might. Besides, he's sweaty. Izuku doesn't like the taste of sweat. Not to mention all of those germs.

Izuku bats the hand off. "Sorry, I love your quirk," he blurts out, making the waitress blush.

"Thank you. It comes in handy." She digs in her pocket and hands Izuku a card. "If you want to learn to play assisted pool, all the info is on there. And if you still have questions, just call us! But while I'm here, can I get y'all started with something to drink?"

Izuku reads the card as All Might goes first and asks for just a simple water. He doesn't even order a lemon to go with it!

“Alright, and for you?” The woman asks, staring at Izuku.

“Uh, I’ll have water too, please.”

Yagi cuts in before she can walk away. “Get him a grape soda as well, actually. If you have it, that is.”

After the woman assures him that they’ll be able to provide the beverage and walks away, Izuku gives All Might a weird look. “I only didn’t order it because I didn’t want to make us look poor.”

“What would make us look poor?” All Might asks, confusion laced in his voice.

Izuku shrugs. “Me. Grape soda is, like… I don’t know. I just didn’t think it would be in a place like this. Didn’t want to embarrass you by asking, y’know?”

At this, All Might frowns, looking a little hurt by the comment. “You don’t embarrass me, Young Midoriya.” He pauses suddenly. “Except when you shattered the door, that is.”

Izuku groans. “I’m gonna be thinking about this every time I try to go to sleep now.”

“Embarrassment builds character, my boy!” All Might gestures with his hands to the pool table. “Now, let’s see you play! The right way this time, preferably.”

He reads the explanation and rules for the modified game four more times over before getting back into position. Essentially, each ball is like the snitch from that one old book series Harry Potter. It’s lightweight, able to fly by itself, and overall has a mind of its own. It’s important to change how you’d normally play so you don’t accidentally do exactly what Izuku did.

He’s learning, thanks. The tech here is phenomenal, so Izuku is definitely going to be researching this later. Hell, he needs to add one of these to the bars at the Club!

Izuku stops before he can start the game, however. He freezes, still eyeing the ball and holding the stick.

Like a frog jumping into a pond and sending ripples everywhere, Izuku can sense Endeavor’s arrival.

His powerful quirk turns onto the street and makes its way to the entrance, and Izuku straightens up. Holy shit. He didn't think Endeavor would actually show up! Actually, *why* exactly did he show up? That's weird.

"He's here," Izuku reports simply, going back to his game. "And alone."

All Might stands up. "How did you—"

"Senses, remember? I sense stuff like that."

His mentor walks closer to him, voice a hushed whisper. "Did the voices tell you?"

Izuku throws him a baffled look. "What? No! They're—they're not omniscient, All Might. They see what I see!"

He doesn't look convinced, but thankfully it doesn't matter, as Endeavor is walking fast. The sheer strength of his quirk sends goosebumps down Izuku's arms and legs. With his empathy quirk, Izuku can feel his determination as if it were his own.

It's almost like a drug. He finds he quite likes it.

It's always the fire users, Banjou says in irritation.

Shut up, Izuku thinks back. *All throughout history, fire quirks have dominated the field in terms of strength. They're always going to be the best.*

Izuku does his best to ignore Endeavor when he first sees him approaching the crystal doors and following behind the hostess.

The dining hall has silenced itself, and when Izuku's gaze flits up lazily to see why, he notes that everyone else has turned around in their seats to watch as the Number Two Hero is escorted to the room.

It's almost funny, Izuku thinks, how more people seem bothered by Endeavor's entrance than they did with All Might's. It must have something to do with respect when it comes to All Might, he figures. No one really called out to All Might or stared too much when they saw him walk in, as they probably saw him as just another high-profile trillionaire hero who needed a break from the attention.

For that, Izuku knows All Might was grateful.

But with Endeavor? Everyone is looking. And they're not hiding it.

It's no doubt annoying, and Izuku has to bite back his smirk. The only thing that would make this better is if everyone took out their phones with the flash on!

Actually, on second thought, maybe Izuku being seen with both Endeavor and All Might at a private restaurant isn't the best idea. He can already picture the headlines… ***Secret Relationship between Rivals? Publicity Stunt Unlikely! Rei CRIES in Divorce Court: 'Whose child is that, Enji?'***

Izuku shudders in disgust. No offense to Todoroki, but he could never imagine being called Endeavor's kid. Hell, Izuku has already had to deny a bunch of shitty conspiracy theories about Rabbit being the love child of Mirko and some other elusive pro hero. Sure, they have similar fighting styles and the same rabbit persona, so it makes sense people would connect him with Mirko, as she was a vigilante once upon a time too! But isn't Mirko too young to even be considered his mother?

The media can be weird.

"Remember," All Might says lowly, a forced smile on his shadowed face. "Best behavior, young man. I mean it."

Izuku doesn't respond. He's not sure what exactly All Might considers good behavior, so he wouldn't want to lie or give him false hope.

Drowning in the feeling of Endeavor's quirk coming closer, Izuku tries to go back to his game. He's slowly getting used to the assisted pool, and it's actually kinda fun! Each ball has a personality, so Izuku spends more time trying to figure out each one instead of really trying to win the game.

This version of pool involves more thinking, strategy, and empathy—something that these trillionaires most assuredly need in their life. Luck is also at play, since the balls can do what they like whenever they wish. That's why it's extremely important to be on the balls' good sides.

All Might opens the door and stands aside to let the number two in. "Ah, *Endeavor!* I'm glad to see you looking well and—"

"We saw each other a few hours ago," Endeavor says shortly, practically shouldering past. His eyes scan the room. "There's no point

in repetitive greetings."

For once, Izuku agrees with him. He shouldn't have been so rude about it, though, especially not to All Might.

Bitch, Izuku thinks.

Endeavor stares at Izuku for all of three seconds, almost as if he heard the comment, before looking away with a roll of his eyes. He doesn't even greet Izuku, not that the boy expected him to.

He's friendly today, Shimura notes, and she sounds like she's smiling. *That stick is still up his ass, though.*

"Of course," Endeavor grunts, finding his seat at the opposite end of the table without trouble. It's like he wants to get this over with as quickly as possible.

Izuku just grins cheekily before going back to his game. *Bet ya thought you'd seen the last of me. I'm everywhere, babe.*

"Did you not decide to bring a friend?" Izuku hears All Might ask. "Or even one of your ch—?"

"I did invite someone," Endeavor cuts off. When Izuku looks his way, he sees the man is glancing down at his phone and eyeing the time. "That damned fool is either dead or running late." He huffs. "Or signing autographs."

All Might awkwardly sits back down, and with the layout of the table, the two heroes are facing each other at both of the head spots. It's interesting to Izuku. He knows Endeavor probably goes for the head spots at any table because he's just like that and is used to his status being known, both as a father and as the number two pro hero, but he can't help but wonder if it's the same for All Might.

Does he take the head spots too because of an authority thing? Or is it just because he's large and physically needs all of that space for himself. Maybe he likes the control of it all—being able to easily see the entire table and what's going on.

Both All Might and Endeavor have a commanding aura; they're the kind of guys you know you have to listen to even if you don't particularly want to. When one of them is in the room, it's common knowledge that they're the strongest. They're the ones people look at to know they're *safe.*

In a room with both of these heroes together, at the *same* time, however… is the dynamic different?

Who do the civilians look at first? There's an obvious difference in power level between them, sure. But their ranks are still touching each other. Would someone scream for All Might or for Endeavor if they were in danger?

Izuku says it would be All Might ninety percent of the time, but he can't be sure. He needs to do some testing.

For Izuku personally, it depends. If he needs saving, he wouldn't want to yell for All Might. It's shameful, and Izuku doesn't want to disappoint his mentor by showing weakness like that. No, he'd much rather suck up his pride and ask Endeavor for help.

If someone else needs help, though? Yeah, Izuku is calling for All Might no matter what.

When Izuku tunes back in, the waitress from before is coming in with their drinks. She sets Izuku's water and grape soda on the table for him before asking Endeavor what he would like, and Izuku can't say he's surprised when the pro hero only asks for Sprite.

"You're not going to order wine or something, sir?" Izuku asks, voice as innocent as possible. "Isn't that what someone like you would prefer?"

"I'm on duty," Endeavor says flatly.

Izuku clicks his tongue and wrinkles his nose. *Bummer.*

All Might clears his throat pointedly before Izuku can verbally reply. "Anyway, I hope he arrives soon. It'll be nice to have us all together for once. We don't ever get to… talk like this, I mean!"

Wait, did Endeavor say who his guest was? Izuku should've been paying more attention! He was too busy analyzing the patterns behind their seat choices to really listen. Shit! He can tell it's not Todoroki just from the way All Might is talking, which sucks. But he guesses he'll just find out who it actually is when it happens.

"We steer clear from each other for good reason," Endeavor replies just a little coldly.

Izuku abandons his game, suddenly much more interested in the

conversation going on. Besides, it seems like All Might is struggling with coming up with good things to talk about.

Good thing Izuku is a pro at that.

He sits in the chair closest to All Might's left side so that he's diagonal to him, and he sips on his fizzy grape soda with delight. He has to admit, the restaurant knew what they were doing with this one! It's delicious.

It actually tastes real, and it doesn't seem to have a horrible aftertaste. It's *perfection.*

"So," All Might says, clearing his throat nervously. Izuku wonders if he should tell his teacher that you can only clear your throat so many times in one conversation until it just becomes weird. He learned that the hard way himself. "I hope everything is going well at your agency?"

Endeavor leans back a little, his broad shoulders beating his chair in terms of width easily. Izuku wants the chair to break. He wants to see that ugly suit of his ruined.

"My agency is always doing well," Endeavor mutters, staring through the glass doors—searching for a threat, maybe? Or is he just anxious? He doesn't feel anxious. Moreso annoyed. "It's the most efficient one in this country."

"Well, yes, I know!" All Might hurries to explain. "I just meant if there was any, uh, news! If anything important has happened or—or if, uh, you got a new sidekick, or—!"

Izuku, sensing a slippery slope approaching, immediately cuts in. "Oh, is Burnin' still your sidekick?"

Endeavor side-eyes him. His blue eyes are bright in the now dimly lit room, and they swirl with thinly hidden suspicion. "She's one of them. I have dozens."

The boy makes a show of looking surprised. "She's been there a while, huh? You'd think she'd become a full-fledged hero by now and leave your agency." He waves his hands. "Not that there's anything wrong with your agency, but—"

"I get it," Endeavor replies flatly. He looks up just as the waitress returns with his Sprite, which was just as well, honestly.

It turns out that the Commission has already paid for a pre-set order of a variety of courses for them, so they won't be needing to order anything unless they personally want it. They are, however, asked to choose some appetizers.

Endeavor is the first to pick one. "Harumaki is fine."

"Oh, great choice!" All Might says with maybe a little too much enthusiasm. Izuku throws him a *what the fuck are you doing* look, but the man just gives a small shrug in response.

The waitress smiles and glances between the two heroes. "Will that be alright for both of you, or would you like two different appetizers?"

Yagi motions for Izuku to speak out, causing the boy to flush. Shit, does he expect him to pick? Really? Where are the menus here? Is he just supposed to know what the hell they serve? Izuku struggles for all of three seconds to figure out what to say, but then he sees a hologram back in the common dining area through the doors, and he's relieved to see that it's a large menu. He can make out the things on their *Specials* list from here!

He says the first thing he can see: "Uh, can I do the sweet and spicy glazed tsukune, please?"

"'Course!" And with that, she's walking away.

Yagi pokes his arm, grinning. "That used to be an old favorite of mine, my boy."

Izuku tips his head. "Really?"

It must suck that you probably can't eat it anymore due to the spice.

"Yeah!" All Might exclaims. "Gran and I used to eat it all the time."

At this, Endeavor makes a grunting noise. It almost sounds like a scoff, and it immediately puts Izuku on high alert. They both glance at the fire user, who looks severely unimpressed. His Sprite sits untouched in front of him.

"Do you cook, sir?" Izuku asks.

"No." His voice is clipped and right back to annoyed. Izuku can feel All Might kick him lightly in the shins beneath the table in warning.

He kicks back to show he hears him but doesn't back down. "Why

not?"

"I never have the time." His eyes flick up to the ceiling. "I'm a busy man."

Huh. You seem relatively… neutral. You're not nearly as angry or aggressive as you could be. This is kinda weird.

Izuku wants to know what happened. Why is he like this? He knows the change is slight, but now he's curious.

"I'm usually the same way," Yagi offers lightly. He gesticulates with his large hands while he speaks. "Ordering food is my go-to these days."

Endeavor pauses for a moment, and the air becomes tense with the wait. But then he's tipping his head a little, shifting almost uncomfortably. Izuku plans to change that. He wants to make him relax so that it'll be easier to get information from him.

"My daughter usually cooks if I cannot."

Izuku wracks his brain for the name. "Fuyumi?"

Endeavor zeros in on him. "Yes. Fuyumi." His jaw twinges, and his next words seem to be forcibly calm. "How did you know?"

"Todoroki says that sometimes she packs his lunch." Izuku grins brightly. "I've tasted some of her cooking before. It's always delicious!"

At the mention of Izuku eating his daughter's food, Endeavor's eyes narrow. "She's a brilliant cook. She has made tsukune before as well. It's likely better than this restaurant's."

Is he praising her to actually praise her, or just to make himself look better? Izuku can't tell, and he doesn't like that. This whole situation is interesting. It's exciting!

He swears Endeavor is his favorite person to study.

But there's also the fact that he said his daughter's cooking is *likely* better than the restaurant's, which means he probably hasn't even tried her tsukune. Izuku is sure that Endeavor has been to this place before, so he must've had tsukune *here.*

This matches up with the image Izuku has of Endeavor in his head.

The man probably never takes the time to sit with his family at home and eat—not that they'd like to eat with him, Izuku thinks balefully.

He doesn't say this aloud, though; All Might would put him in a grave if he did.

"I'm sure it is better!" Izuku exclaims, and he's not lying. Judging by what he's already eaten from Todoroki's sister, he can tell she's skilled! "I bet she—"

"Why is he here?"

Izuku snaps his mouth shut at the interruption and stares down blankly at his soda, which is still fizzing away. And there it is: the question of the night, huh? Izuku knew Endeavor would question it sooner or later.

It's obvious Endeavor was talking to All Might, so Izuku—with great effort—forces himself to bite his tongue again. He can be polite. He can be patient.

He can do it in this situation.

"Well, I brought him as my guest," Yagi answers simply. He runs a finger along the rim of his glass, but he keeps his gaze on his coworker. "He is my student, and you've already met him before, so I figured it wouldn't be weird to—"

"Bringing a boy to a high profile meeting such as this one is as foolish as it gets." Endeavor's fiery eyes turn on Izuku, and he's scrutinizing him like a scientist would his experiment. "With the both of us here in the same room, who knows what trouble will come our way."

All Might laughs loudly, brushing him off. "You make it sound like we're a magnet for villains! Trust me, this is probably the safest place Young Midoriya could be. And I made sure to be lowkey upon arriving. By the time any criminal gets word we came here, we'll be long gone, I say."

"Even still, this is no place for children," Endeavor says in even more annoyance.

At that stupid last word, Izuku opens his mouth to chime in, but All Might is kicking him in the shins again before he can so much as get the first syllable out. The boy throws a dirty glare at his mentor, who ignores him.

“Ah, I was under the impression this was nothing more than a fun dinner! No business is allowed, right? All of the serious stuff was taken care of earlier.” All Might’s voice grows a little more tight. “Doesn’t that sound more appealing?”

“You could’ve brought Todoroki,” Izuku adds, skillfully moving out of the way in time so All Might can’t kick him. “I was kinda hoping you would.”

“My son has no business being here,” Endeavor comments, and for the first time tonight his voice is actually scathing. His normal deathly demeanor has made an appearance, and Izuku feels his skin start to prickle at the feeling of his anger rising up. It reminds him of a temperature gauge in a sauna. “Especially not with the likes of you.”

Izuku takes it in stride, used to these kinds of insults by now. “We’re in the same class, you know. And All Might is literally his teacher, so how would him being here be so different than—”

“My boy,” All Might interrupts with a pointed look, “why don’t you go wash your hands before the food comes out?”

Seriously? Izuku stares incredulously, aware of the all-seeing eyes of Endeavor on them both. “I washed my hands before we arrived.”

“Yes, and you were touching the pool sticks over there. Who knows what kind of bacteria are on those!”

Izuku fists his hands underneath the table, trying to tell All Might to go politely fuck himself with just his eyes. But the pro hero doesn’t seem to back down, so Izuku—with his jaw clenched—stands up from the table and excuses himself.

He feels Endeavor’s gaze on him as he leaves, and his face darkens. *If Yagi wants me to leave so badly he could’ve just told me. Why did he invite me if I can’t even talk?*

Put yourself in his shoes, Shinomori responds in a deep rumble. *He’s trying to maintain his composure while making sure Endeavor will do the same. It seems he brought you here as a way to keep Endeavor on his best behavior as well.*

Well, then that’s just boring.

En speaks up then. *Only you would say a dinner with the top two heroes is boring. You’re spoi—kid, you just passed the bathrooms.*

Oh, right. Izuku slips into the bathrooms (what a fancy place!) and does his business. His irritation is quickly overtaking his will to be good and be patient. Because seriously, why is All Might acting like Izuku doesn't know what he's doing? Izuku isn't *that* stupid. He's not going to make Endeavor blow up and burn down the whole block! He knows how to control himself in a situation like this.

Hell, he's a high ranking guard for one of the most dangerous and *massive* organized crime groups in the entirety of Japan! He's learned to keep it professional when he has to. He knows which bombs he can set off and which bombs he can't (quite literally).

Plus, it's not like he hates Endeavor anymore. Well, not completely, anyway. Ever since Hosu, Izuku has had a growing respect for the flame hero. He caught Izuku before he could become a pancake on the pavement, and he didn't take off Rabbit's mask even though he really should've.

Even though it would've been incredibly easy. Izuku was unconscious for most of it, so it's not like he would've been able to fight. Endeavor could have peeked and never told a soul about it, to be honest. Izuku wouldn't know! And, really, that's an even scarier thought.

The point is, Izuku's relationship with Endeavor has grown even more complicated, as now he feels sort of indebted to the man. Why he didn't reveal his identity that night after going through the trouble of saving him is a mystery Izuku is keen on solving.

He doesn't like owing people things.

Shaking his head from these thoughts, Izuku continues his rant.

"They keep saying they understand how I feel and yet they all still treat me like I'm four," Izuku mutters, washing his hands with the very expensive liquid soap displayed. He quickly pockets one of the small bottles once he's done; he figures Yamada will like this smell. "Kinda hypocritical."

I think you're just being dramatic, Second says honestly. *The fact you're even here proves that your master doesn't see you as a helpless kid. Get over it.*

Izuku rolls his eyes and pulls open the door after waving his hands around to get them dry. He doesn't want to touch the fancy towels left on the side. The textures are off and will make him cringe. "You should get over that receding hairline. I haven't even met you but I

just *know* you've got one."

Worry about your own hair first, shithead.

Izuku doesn't bother asking what he means by that; he's too irritated by his current situation to care about petty insults.

He nearly crashes into a waiter coming out from the kitchen on his way back to the secluded room. The young boy—he can't be any older than twenty—jumps to the side as an overreaction and bumps into a side table, jostling the tray of expensive drinks balancing in his hand.

Three of the glasses wobble and then tip right off the edge, and Izuku doesn't think before he moves. He quickly grabs the martini in one hand and the slim wine glass (he thinks it's port wine) in the other before they can spill or hit the ground. The third drink—a draft beer—is still in the air, and it's going to make Izuku really pissed if he gets beer on him and has to smell nasty for the rest of the night, especially since he's wearing his new suit, so he does the only logical thing he can think of!

Boost burns at Izuku's calves and knees and allows Izuku to jump up high. He head-butts the edge of the glass to get it upright again and then quickly gets into position back on the ground. The drink lands perfectly on the center of his head with his curls acting as a spiderweb, ensuring it won't tip over again.

And just like that, Izuku has caught all three drinks with ease.

The waiter sucks in a large breath. "Oh, I'm very sorry!" He moves the remaining drinks to the side and bows quickly. "I didn't see you coming! Thank you so much for catching them! That—that was *really* impressive!"

Izuku places the martini and port wine on the tray carefully and then plucks the beer off of his head. "No worries. It was kinda fun. By the way, are you quirkless by any chance?"

The waiter stiffens, his freckled cheeks turning a dark shade of red—almost matching the wine in his hand. "Er, I'm sorry?"

Immediately, Izuku feels like an asshole. "Oh, shit. Nevermind! Uh, sorry! That was invasive. I don't know why I asked that."

Izuku didn't sense the waiter at all while walking, which is how they almost bumped into each other in the first place. He still doesn't sense

a quirk inside of him. He can pick out some emotions now that he's talked to him and is looking for them, but he doesn't feel anything with Extract. Izuku just wanted to find out if he was quirkless or not to help explain why this happened.

He simply wanted to assure himself that he doesn't have another Eraserhead issue on his hands where he simply isn't able to feel the other person's quirk or track them.

But he sort of forgot that it's kind of rude to ask someone about their quirk status, especially upon just meeting them.

It's not like he can do anything about it now, however. Izuku can't see any quirk blockers or hear the telltale buzzing of any smaller pieces of tech that could do such a thing on the waiter's body, so it's pretty obvious that he is indeed quirkless.

The look on his face solidifies this thought, too.

Izuku feels even worse.

"Sorry, and thanks again," the waiter says, looking flustered and upset. He begins to get himself back in order before turning away. "This is my first table of the night. I best deliver these dr—"

"Is that an All Might pin?" Izuku asks before he can stop himself.

The waiter pauses, and when he turns back, his eyes are glittering from the lights from the nearby bar. It reminds Izuku of sparkling water and pop rocks. "Oh, uh, yeah! He's kinda my favorite hero." He sounds embarrassed as he says it, but Izuku isn't sure why he would be.

"Really? He's mine too!" Izuku smiles at the pin on the boy's apron and spots the matching ***Go Beyond!*** one right next to it. "Have you ever met him? He's even cooler in person."

"I haven't yet, but—wait, you have?" His mouth gapes open a little. "Seriously?"

Izuku laughs, and it's easy on the ears. "Yeah! He's awesome. Say, would you *want* to meet him?"

There's a genuine aura of excitement and awe coming off of the waiter in waves, and there are no signs of maliciousness or ill intent, so Izuku isn't nervous about what he's going to offer.

Sometimes it's nice to help another fanboy's dreams come true.

Enji hasn't been in this restaurant in years. In fact, he hasn't been in any place this fancy and expensive in quite a long time, being who he is and all.

Sure, he enjoys the occasional drink and is oftentimes expected to be at different dinner parties and charity events all over the country, but he usually sends a representative from his agency over for him so he doesn't have to actually attend. It's just easier that way. Safer, too.

He's also way too busy to deal with the political and personal discussions that go on during those events, so he'd much rather pass and do something more important—like a mission. His list of objectives has tripled in size since the Hosu City attack, so he's been working even harder than ever. He's even been taking five night shifts a week on top of his day shifts now, which he never used to do. Not even when he was younger!

Working a double is now Enji's new normal. He can't remember the last time he got a decent amount of sleep. To be fair, even when he manages to find the time to sleep, he always wakes up in a cold sweat.

Not even his dreams are nice to him.

So, sitting here in a too-fancy restaurant which has the slowest fucking customer service known to man when he could be off finishing up another mission truly does feel like a spit in the eye to Enji. What makes it all worse is the fact that *All Might* of all people is sitting in front of him with that stupid look on his self-righteous face, trying to make conversation at a time that Enji would really much rather he shut the hell up.

All Might is lucky Enji showed up at all. If it weren't for the Hero's Commission practically forcing him to be here, best believe he wouldn't be.

"Listen," All Might starts with a grave sigh once his student is out of earshot. "I do not want to be here any more than you do, I imagine. This is not how I would have wanted to spend my Sunday night, if I

am to be honest. But I… I do want us to be on the right foot."

Enji stares at him, gaze hard. It's taking every last morsel of his being to not open his mouth and say something incredibly insulting and yet truthful. In any other circumstance, he wouldn't hold back, that's for sure. In any other circumstance, he probably would've snarled right in All Might's face, maybe dropped a drink on the floor, and stomped out to where his driver is waiting for him. But this is not any ordinary time.

All Might knows it, Enji knows it, and the country knows it.

Despite how strong his feelings toward All Might are, Enji is always going to put the safety of the civilians first. His own emotions and goals will be put on the back burner until they're taken care of.

While talking to All Might is always a pain in Enji's ass, as the man just won't stop fucking *prattling* on about useless things and offering up his weird ideas during meetings, he can… *deal* with him for this situation.

He can deal with All Might if needed. He didn't fight his way to the number two spot for nothing.

"Hosu has left the public in shambles," All Might continues, staring down at his glass again. Enji feels a twinge of annoyance rise up inside him. *Why won't he look me in the eye for longer than five seconds? Does he think he shouldn't bother with it?* "As much as it pains me to admit, we need to make a change. We must do more than we have been doing already. A… united front is something the citizens need more than anything now. The President said that—"

Enji's white-hot anger spills over, and it's a miracle he doesn't end up shouting. "Why are you acting as if I hadn't been present in the meeting alongside you? I know what must be done, All Might. This dinner is a waste of my time."

All Might only smiles grimly. He starts again, this time lower. "I know. I feel the same way, honestly. But we may as well make the most of this, right? Dinner is already paid for!"

Enji fights back a scoff. "As if I care to stay for food that'll never satisfy me."

"You're a picky eater, too?" All Might asks, leaning forward. His two hair pieces leave a V-shaped shadow on the table, and as the hero

moves, the V creeps closer and closer to Enji. “Glad to know I’m not alone! Well, I’m not picky so much as I am *unable* to eat many foods, but who cares about the details, right! Hah!”

“You’re even louder in private than you are in public,” Enji seethes, looking away from his rival. He can’t look at him too long or else he’ll run the risk of succumbing to the urge to slam his fist into his stomach.

“Ah, sorry. I tend to get excited sometimes.” The blond hero coughs a little in his large palm. “Filling awkward silences is sort of a mandatory trait of mine.”

“Get rid of it.”

“I’ll inform you when I find a way to do that.” All Might takes another long sip of his drink.

Enji, after a moment of trying to calm himself, follows the action with his Sprite. He really should’ve gone for a Coke. When the waitress comes back, he’ll get that instead.

When Enji is in the middle of debating if he should just get the fuck out of here right now, All Might hums softly, garnering his attention.

“Truthfully,” he begins, sounding hesitant, “I want us to resolve our issues here to make sure the people know we are working together on this. I understand we’ll never be anything more than… *estranged coworkers,* really, but—and part of me feels that this is due to my misgivings and lack of understanding of the situation—but I do think it would serve us both well to maintain a good, strong public image.”

Enji’s frown deepens even more. His expression screams unimpressed. “Are you saying you want us to prance around for the cameras as some kind of *dynamic duo?”*

Geez, the mere idea of it has Enji’s skin prickling. It felt wrong on his tongue to even say it aloud.

All Might shakes his head. “It wouldn’t be just for the media. I was hoping it could, well… that it could be real. Er, in a way.” Seeing the very real spark of death in Enji’s eyes, All Might seems to backpedal. “I know you’re swamped with missions! I only meant that if we shared some of our objectives, and even merged some of our patrol teams led by our sidekicks, things would not only become much easier for us, but for the whole country! Our control over the villains would be

reinforced, and public safety wouldn't have to be something that civilians worry about anymore."

"I don't need the help of your agency to—"

"Of course you don't need my agency's help, just as I don't need yours." All Might's tone, though matter-of-fact, doesn't come off as arrogant whatsoever. It does nothing but annoy Enji further, though, as he thinks it might as well have been arrogant! How does All Might manage to be so… commanding, so much more *powerful,* without even trying? Without even acknowledging it?

This is why Enji has always been big on actions. He doesn't care for explaining what he's about to do. He finds it not only stupid but plain dangerous. Why waste time with explanations and boring promises when the only thing that will ever truly matter is *action?*

The only thing that'll ever matter is *strength.*

Instead of saying he will keep the country safe during those heinous conferences, Enji prefers to spend his time out in the streets, taking in heaps of dangerous criminals every hour.

He finds it's more impactful this way than any other way, and he's not too keen on changing things up.

"But the fact of the matter is that we need to use our positions to assure those families out there," All Might continues. "You've seen the footage as much as I have, Todoroki. Hosu has… damaged many lives. It's going to take a while to repair the trust of civilians with heroes. If we combine our efforts, I know this process will go by much more smoothly."

"That's incredibly wishful thinking," Enji points out, still not on board. "Thinking a team-up between the two of us will *magically* mend things is naive."

All Might sighs. "Our public division, as much as I've tried to downplay it, has inadvertently created a division in the people as well. Something else I'm worried about is that… if this division doesn't get taken care of, then the country may panic when the time comes for you to move up in the rankings."

Immediately, Enji's jaw tightens. His neck snaps up, and his eyes sharpen. "Move up?" His words are dangerously low. "I'm not understanding."

All Might laughs nervously. It's probably the fifth time he's done that since Enji has arrived, and it's about to make the man explode. "We all know I am getting older, and I can't continue to hide the fact that I am growing weaker by the day, Todoroki. It… it is only a matter of time before—"

"Are you not ashamed?" Enji snaps, his blood rushing to his ears. It causes fire to bloom from his skin and ignite the hairs on his face. "Why admit to such a weakness when you're still able to fight! How ignorant are you to just—!"

"Believe me, I am already ashamed." All Might's crestfallen tone is unlike anything Enji has ever heard from the hero. It confuses Enji to no end and only succeeds in making his fire burn hotter. "But perhaps I did lie a little earlier. I *am* relying on you. Nearly as much as the public will, no doubt. In order to maintain Japan's peace and safety now and in the future, we have to work as one. I have already been informed of a few conferences we have together in the next month."

For once in his life, Enji is at a loss for words. He spends the next few moments just looking at him. Across the table, around eight feet from Enji, the number one pro hero sits with his bulging muscles, that wry grin, and a knowing look to his keen eyes. Everything about All Might is still so relaxed, so powerful, even as he's admitting to being far from where he was in his prime.

And that… that hurts. Because here All Might is, saying plainly that he is at the weakest he's ever been, and yet he's still *miles* ahead of Enji. He's still arguably one of the fastest, strongest, and best battle strategists in the eastern hemisphere! Hell, the man before him is ranked among the top ten strongest heroes in the damn world.

It's a chilling reminder of everything that Enji has always struggled to achieve. Everything he's ever done has been to reach All Might, to surpass *him,* and even now, with Enji in his forties and All Might only a few years older and now apparently growing weaker, Enji can't measure up.

All Might was blessed with his power, and while Enji isn't so jealous to claim the man never worked to get where he is, he also isn't going to say that he's worked the hardest out of everyone else. People like Enji have to fight tooth and nail to rise up, to be taken seriously, and to create the opportunities they need themselves.

What has All Might done besides be naturally *better?*

If Enji can't fight him, can't show that he has trained himself to be even stronger than All Might, what's the point? What's the point in getting to that number one spot?

Fuck. Enji doesn't want the title as the number one hero unless All Might is right behind him in second.

Enji's hands grip the fabric of his suit pants so hard he can hear them tearing. His palms heat up, and he forces his quirk back down like a nail being hammered into a splintered piece of wood.

The insinuation that All Might is just going to step down or be forced into retirement before Enji will have a chance to fight him for his spot makes something cold coil in the bottom of his stomach.

"Do you think I care about a few pointless conferences?" Enji asks, a step before the tone he uses with villains. "If you think for one moment that I am content in simply *taking your place,* you're even more stupid than I thought. I will not be replacing anyone, All Might. I will be better than you, *stronger* than you, and I will be marking my own place, far beyond what you've ever hoped to achieve." He rises to his feet. "I will not sit here any longer than I have already and listen to you insult—"

There's movement behind the crystal doors leading into the room, so Enji cuts off his rant, immediately on alert. Instead of a villain or the waitress coming in, All Might's brat attempts to push open the door, having returned from whatever the hell he was doing—Enji has forgotten already.

It was some lame attempt by All Might to get him out of the room, surely.

The boy struggles to come in at first. He pulls at the doors a few times and says something that Enji lip-reads as *are you fucking kidding me,* before his brain cell finally seems to pull its weight to tell him that it's a push door.

Midoriya walks in looking happy, as he's brought some other weird-looking boy with him. He's dressed in waiter garb, Enji notes.

He scans him quickly for any bulges that might denote weapons or recording devices, but he doesn't see anything of harm. It never hurts to be too careful, though.

"Oh, bad time?" Midoriya asks, doe-eyed. He looks back and forth

between the two pro heroes comically, noting the way All Might is still sitting comfortably in his chair and the way Enji is out of his.

“Of course not!” All Might recovers quickly. “We were just chatting.”

The other boy beside Midoriya stares in shock and shifts uncomfortably on his feet. “Are—are you sure, All Might, sir? I—I can leave and—”

Midoriya elbows him lightly. “No, it’s okay! Mommy and Daddy were just fighting again. It's pretty common, actually, so don’t fret.”

Enji’s flames expand with a muted *fwump* at the same time that All Might chokes hard. The blond has to use the pleated napkin provided by the restaurant to cover up his coughs.

Meanwhile, Enji quickly wonders the legalities of killing the number one hero’s student—but then he decides he doesn’t actually care for the legality of it at all; he may just do it anyway.

Midoriya only giggles at Enji’s display. “Just joking, sir! You might wanna control your flames, though; the sprinklers might go off, and my suit isn’t waterproof. I’ll cry if it gets ruined on the first day.”

And then the boy turns away from Enji and introduces the waiter to All Might, mentioning something about an autograph.

It’s such an abrupt change in mood from what was happening before that Enji almost doesn’t reel in his fire. He stays standing for another few moments before slowly sinking back into his chair, his muscles tense. He was prepared to storm out just a second ago, but now that Midoriya is back and the previous conversation is over…

Maybe, in the darkest corner of Enji’s brain, he doesn’t see this dinner to be as stupid as he originally said. Maybe, just maybe, he figures he should stay.

Just like always, Enji is being drawn to All Might in a way that not even he can fully understand.

Even still, Enji stews angrily to himself. All Might is even more insufferable up close and personal than he remembered, and Midoriya is even worse than him. The brat is like a mini Hawks and All Might fusion. It’s the absolute worst combination to ever exist. He’s giving Enji a headache.

He should've known All Might would bring this street rat along with him. His favoritism hasn't gone unnoticed by Enji, even with such little interactions. Besides, All Might was willing to put himself between Enji and Midoriya during the conferences—something that still leaves a bitter taste in Enji's mouth. That decision of All Might's alone says a lot in itself.

"Uh, excuse me, Endeavor, sir?"

Enji peels an eye open to glare down at the anxious young waiter Midoriya introduced to All Might. The boy is holding out a plain notebook and a brightly colored pen. "I know you're trying to be lowkey here, but can I still get an autograph?"

Surprise runs up Enji's spine, making his eyes widen just a fraction. An autograph? He wants a damn autograph? From *Enji?* The idea almost makes him laugh in the boy's face. When was the last time someone asked Enji for an autograph? His autographs are usually sold at hero conventions, sure, but those flyers are always pre-made, and he only does it because his marketing team tells him to. He never actually signs them in front of civilians, and nor does he ever do it when someone asks him to.

To be fair, requests for a signature or picture are few and far in between.

Enji scoffs and turns away with a shake of his head. "I don't give autographs."

"Oh, yeah! Sorry!" The boy bows as an apology and takes a quick step back. "I'll just—"

Midoriya reaches over and takes the notebook. "No worries. I can forge it for ya! I've perfected his handwriting."

At this, Enji jolts forward and snatches the notebook from Midoriya's hands. Little embers fly off of his face at the action, but that doesn't stop him from grinding out a threatening *you better be joking* to the green-haired student.

He nearly cracks the notebook's spine when he slams it open on the table. In the middle of the page he's opened it up to, he sees All Might's fresh signature: as large and bold as ever. Sloppy, too.

Enji swipes a hand over his flaming hair, relishing in the burning sensation he receives. It helps to calm him down. Somewhat, at least.

What he is *not* going to do is sign some boy's book with the same pen that All Might used. That's just disgusting. "Give me another," he commands, refusing the pen the waiter has in his hand.

Soon, Enji is begrudgingly writing out his hero name on the page before All Might's signature. He doesn't write a quote or an inspiring message—none of that shit. All Might already had that covered.

When Enji hands the book back and turns to see the absolute, unbridled *joy* in the waiter's eyes, something inside of him jumps around. The boy thanks him in a watery, cheerful tone, and it's so nice, so sweet, that it… it almost makes Enji sick.

Actually, it does make him sick. Enji's throat closes up, no doubt due to his dismay, and his lips pull back in disgust. Anyone who gets that overjoyed from a damn signature needs help, he thinks. It cannot be healthy, surely.

Enji himself never understood why people idolize their heroes. You can look up to them, of course, but to the point where you're about to fall over upon meeting them? Absolutely not. It's unnecessary.

The heroes Enji looked forward to watching when he was young all had one thing in common: they were all the strongest. He was sort of obsessed with them, but that was only because he was trying to *be* like them. He was trying to be *better*.

He didn't like the heroes personally, no. He liked what they had. He was *really* obsessed with everything they stood for.

"He said he thinks our food will be out in a second, Endeavor," Midoriya says once the waiter has left. The boy is back to being seated at his spot by All Might, and he has this trifling, shit-eating grin on his face for some reason. "So I hope you'll stay for longer."

"Stop talking to me," Enji says.

"But, like, why would—"

Enji throws his coworker a level glare. "All Might, I thought you'd have taught this brat how to do as he's told by now."

All Might coughs again before nodding. He gives his student a meaningful look, one that Enji gives to Shouto all the time when he's being stupid—though All Might's admittedly holds less weight.

“Young Midoriya,” the blond chastises, “let’s lay off the antagonizing.”

Enji’s brows go up, and he can’t help but hum quietly to himself in appreciation. Huh. He honestly didn’t expect All Might to actually take his side and listen. That was… interesting. And also sort of idiotic on All Might’s part.

Midoriya shoots his teacher an appalled look. “What? I wasn’t antagonizing him that time! I just said he should—!”

“Endeavor is sensitive,” All Might cuts in, eyes twinkling with something Enji can only identify as mischief. “So just accept that, my boy.”

Okay, yeah, there it is. Enji had a feeling there was something else here.

“Your student is going to end up missing soon,” Enji mutters, knowing it would only be silly to threaten All Might personally. He forces himself to take a long drink of his Sprite. Fuck, when is he going to be able to put in that Coke?

All Might laughs good naturedly, and though he sounds as though he’s joking, his next words still make the hairs on Enji's neck stick up. “If he goes missing, your face will be the only thing to pop up on the news for months.”

In other words: *I’ll kill you.*

Yeah, that’s something Enji can respect. He would do the same for Shouto.

He’d expect nothing less from All Might.

Most people would say that All Might doesn’t have it in him to be so vengeful. But Enji is not like most people. Being second to All Might in the rankings for decades now has allowed Enji to see multiple sides to the blond, even from afar.

He’s seen him at his strongest, he’s seen him at his most exhausted, and he’s seen him at his most unstable. While Enji will never claim to have seen him at his angriest, he *has* seen him furious a few times.

And those times were enough to let Enji know that there was another side to All Might. One that won’t ever shy away from a challenge or back down from a fight.

There's a side to All Might that ensures he will always get the last hit in. Even broken and bloody, he'll always be the last one smiling.

Revenge isn't supposed to be heroic, and Enji used to be opposed to it back when he was in UA, at least, but somehow All Might took vengeance and made it into something akin to peace.

He made it seem as right and natural as a shockwave after an explosion. Now, Enji isn't sure if he'll ever see All Might at his angriest, nor is he sure he should see him.

But he wants to see it. Some dark part of himself wants to witness something like that, if only to prove that he and All Might aren't so far apart after all.

"My boy?"

Enji slides his gaze over to see All Might frowning down at Midoriya with worry etched into the lines on his face.

Midoriya has his eyes trained on the table, and his expression is blank. With his lips only slightly parted and his brows just *barely* furrowed, Enji gets the impression he's thinking hard about something—a feat, if he's being honest. From the little he's seen from Midoriya, he was beginning to think the kid didn't have the ability to experience a higher level of thinking at all.

"Young Midoriya," All Might prods again, more urgent this time. He lays a hand on his shoulder, shaking him just a little. "Are you alright?"

When All Might shakes him again, red sparks flit around Midoriya's body, making both pro heroes share a quick look.

"Does he do this often?" Enji asks, unimpressed. He truthfully doesn't care much for the answer; he's only asking because he wants some more information on Midoriya to file away for later.

All Might ignores the question for now. "Hey, does this have anything to do with, er, what we talked about earlier? Kid?"

Enji tilts his head forward just a fraction. Midoriya's eyes are now darting around at different points on the table, and he seems to become more frequent as the seconds tick on.

Drugs? No. Enji nearly laughs aloud at the idea of All Might's special

student shooting up fucking *drugs*.

“Mido—”

The boy looks up suddenly, pinning Enji with his emerald gaze. The red lightning moves around him once more, crossing over the features on his face in jagged arcs. “Did you say you invited Hawks?”

His tone is neutral, almost as if he’s asking about the weather, though his body language betrays his nonchalance.

All Might looks at Enji, and there’s something there on his face that Enji would really like to be able to identify.

“Only ten minutes ago,” Enji tells the boy, sniffing in annoyance. “Pay better attention, or maybe your parents should take you to an ear exam.”

Midoriya deflates immediately upon his response, and Enji can see the way his chest goes down in relief. “Oh. Okay! That’s… great! That’s great.”

And so Midoriya reaches forward and takes a hold of his grape soda, pouring the rest of it into his water glass. Which, firstly, is just atrocious. Enji doesn’t even have a quip to say about that, as he’s genuinely too disgusted. Secondly, Enji can’t believe this boy is actually being tutored by All Might himself. They’re obviously close enough for Midoriya to be invited to this kind of dinner.

He’s pathetic, he thinks sourly, eyeing the way All Might leans over to whisper something in Midoriya’s ear. *What do you see in him, All Might? He’s strong for his age and size, and fast, too, but that’s it. Surely there are better students to take an interest in at UA?*

Enji considers his son to be the perfect student. He’s independent, a fast thinker, a keen battle strategist in tough times, and overall extremely powerful. He has the raw strength with his quirk that Enji only wished he could have as a young boy. Sure, Shouto is a little too independent and disobedient at times, but that’s what allows for his other positive traits to shine through.

He’ll be a fast-growing hero, even by Enji’s standards, and he’ll be great to take on the Endeavor agency. Hell, Enji is relying on him to be even better than his father.

And Midoriya is *nothing* like Shouto. He is miles away from being a

good hero student to bet on and put your time into. Enji had thought that out of all heroes, All Might would be the one to have the higher standards regarding who he chooses to mentor. Yet here he is, having chosen the runt of the litter.

But Enji can't be so judgmental without first knowing the full story. He assumes there's something about Midoriya that just isn't being shown outwardly here. There has to be some sort of catch.

There's no way All Might would put effort into Midoriya as such a high ranking hero if he weren't already sure of the boy's abilities and potential.

Maybe Midoriya is something Enji will have to wait and watch out for in the future.

A flash of color catches Enji's attention, and he can't help his groan this time when he sees the familiar tan and black costume of the second most annoying thing to exist around him these days.

Hawks is a pain in the ass. In fact, he resembles a damn horsefly, in Enji's opinion. The past few weeks have been torturous, as Hawks has insisted on stopping to talk with Enji every time he spots him—which is a lot, considering that Hawks has incredible eyesight. He swears it's on purpose nowadays.

They're not buddies, so Enji isn't sure why Hawks butted in and asked him after their meeting earlier to join him tonight. Hawks wasn't even invited to the meeting itself; he stalked Enji afterwards to ask him, meaning he must've either eavesdropped with his enhanced senses or heard it from a Commission member.

Both choices make Enji want to burn off his wings.

But Hawks didn't exactly allow Enji to deny him. It wasn't so much asking as it was telling Enji that he was coming.

"I'm the number three, aren't I? I better join in on this United Heroes stunt y'all got going on. It'll be better for ratings if I'm standing with you two, trust me. Also, I'm always in for free food."

"You make that obvious," Enji says, using his fire to blast off from the nearest Commission balcony. He better get a start on his patrol.

Hawks flies easily alongside him, a cheesy grin lighting up his features. "You shouldn't forget that I have better popularity ratings than you, Endy."

Yeah. As if Enji can forget that.

But truthfully, the only reason Enji told Hawks to do whatever the hell he wanted (which was basically blanket permission to come as his guest) is because Hawks told him he could do most of the talking with All Might for him, as he apparently has a lot to discuss with the man.

At the promise to limit as much interaction with All Might as physically possible, Enji decided it wouldn't be terrible to have Hawks at the dinner.

It would also get the Commission off of Enji's back about not inviting someone, so there was that.

But now that Hawks has arrived, around twenty minutes late, Enji finds that maybe he should've stuck to his guns and denied Hawks altogether.

Maybe then the tense dinner that follows when Hawks settles in would've been better maintained.

Enji doesn't really regret it, though, as this dinner allows him to find one of the last pieces he was looking for to complete the puzzle in his mind.

It's a puzzle that's been haunting him for almost a year now, just about. Ever since the alarms went off at his agency that day and his private files were—what did they say?— *misplaced.*

He got them back, but not all of it. There were a few things in the envelope he kept inside his office that he never got back, and he's been trying to figure out *why* for the past few months now.

Rabbit is a case he personally assigned to himself. He's worked hard on it. He's been swimming in it, so to speak. Consumed by it along with his other, admittedly far more important missions.

It takes a lot to get Enji obsessed with something, but Rabbit practically asked for it, didn't he? He's targeted Enji a hundred times, and he's made it his motto to make a fool out of the pro hero and disrupt his private life so *openly,* so how is this Enji's fault?

In the future, Enji will think to himself that it all should've been obvious from the very beginning. He was just too *angry* to see the answers sitting right in front of him.

Maybe that's why he didn't unmask Rabbit during Hosu. Not only because the vigilante saved his son, but because it just would've been too easy. It wouldn't have been right. All of that hard work put to shame due to one lucky fight?

No. Enji wasn't going to unmask the stupid, irritating, *unlawful* boy who had just got done pummeling away at the Hero Killer. It would have been unfair. It wouldn't have ever been a real win.

Enji can never finish off someone else's battered opponent and call it a victory.

And, just like everything else in his life, he'll answer for his choice soon.

Chapter End Notes

> had a dream that my chihuahua sprouted leathery wings with talons and flew away into the night because I apparently fed her past midnight. i woke up suspicious cause it sounds like something she'd do
>
> i quite like the song rises the moon - liana flores on YouTube
> next chap is hawks heavy so □□□ RAHH
>
> also, a question that's been haunting me. mido said "mommy and daddy" as a joke obviously but now im wondering who would be considered the mom and who the dad in this situation. this is an important question. somebody help give professional insight. is endeavor the dad? and yagi the mom? hmm
>
> p

any strings attached

Chapter Notes

> the results of the recent poll are here ☠️☠️ nearly EVERYONE said that all might is the dad and endeavor is the mom. more specifically, the common theme I was seeing is that all might is the “cringe dad who makes dad jokes all the time” but will “step up when needed” and endeavor is the “strict housewife” 🤷‍♀️🤷‍♀️ I love y’all bc why can I literally picture that so clearly wtf (I can honestly see it either way depending on which personality traits you’re focusing on with each, but I just think this is funny)
>
> anyway happy New Years!! I’m glad to be doing another year with you all :) please be safe and also strive to be happier than ever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Those boys at school gave you that, didn’t they?”

Izuku keeps his eyes on the ground. He hates looking at his father, as the face that stares back at him now only resembles that of the Nomu in the basement. “It doesn’t hurt, sir.”

“I’d be shocked if it did. I’ve given you far worse for better reasons.” Sensei moves from his seat on the plush couch and comes towards Izuku. His dress shoes click against the glossy floor, matching the erratic thumping inside Izuku’s chest. “Why didn't you fight back?”

“I’m stronger than—” Izuku cuts himself off with a low hiss when his father grabs his chin and lets his fingers roam over the mottled bruise on his jaw. His large thumb presses into the injury, igniting the nerves in Izuku’s entire face and causing him to stiffen even more. “I’m, uh, a lot stronger. I didn’t want to hurt them; they would snitch on me.”

“And?” Father tilts Izuku’s head to inspect more of his face. How he still manages to sense things so clearly without eyesight is a mystery not even Izuku can begin to solve. “Worst case scenario, you get suspended. Or, better yet, expelled. At least then I’d have an excuse to pull you from public school.”

Izuku doesn’t have a reply to that, so he keeps quiet. Father is in an extraordinarily good mood today, so it’s best to be on guard. Izuku has to be even more alert than usual right now.

“Tell me, was it that ‘friend’ of yours again?” Sensei says the word in a mocking tone, his contempt thinly hidden.

Izuku swallows, letting his father manhandle his face however he wants. Now the man is touching the healing scars on his face and tracing over them. “No, sir. Kacchan wasn’t around after school when… when it happened.”

“Shame.” He hums and lets go of his son. “Izuku, my boy, you do feel it inside you, don’t you?”

Izuku’s brows furrow, and he finds himself moving his gaze in question to the empty sockets on All for One’s face.

Sensei pulls away from him and goes to the fridge to put ice in a glass. Izuku goes back to focusing on the cracks in the counter before him.

“That anger,” he specifies, as if amused. “I can sense it inside of you so clearly. It’s residing right there in your chest, just past your bones. You’re angry at those foolish boys, aren’t you?”

The grape soda doesn’t taste good anymore. It just tastes bitter. Izuku puts his glass down before he ends up shattering it.

“I don’t blame them anymore, Father,” Izuku whispers.

All for One pours himself a drink, his back to Izuku. “Yes, you do. And that’s okay. There’s nothing wrong with your anger, little one. It doesn’t make you any less credible or mature. You can use it freely. In fact, that’s its sole purpose, you know. It’s one of life’s greatest natural weapons.”

“But…” Mom said not to give into anger, didn’t she? It’s only been a couple of years or so without her, and Izuku has already forgotten her voice. Is this really what she would want from Izuku?

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, his bad arm beginning to throb again with little pins and needles digging into every square inch of his skin. Hawks’ quirk is like a drug you don’t want to ever try again. It’s potent, addicting, and the most damaging of all.

It scares Izuku. Here, in this restaurant surrounded by the top three heroes, he’s terrified.

Although maybe, just maybe, there’s something else clawing up Izuku’s throat. Maybe there’s something… more. Something Izuku has always tried his best to keep at bay, for he remembers the last time he

let it loose.

“But what?” Father prods, except it’s said in that tone of his that makes it clear he doesn’t actually care about what Izuku has to say. It’s only a warning for Izuku to bite back what he was about to counter with.

“Nothing,” the boy replies.

His father’s word is always law nowadays. Izuku can understand that, at least. It’s comforting, having a clear place to take solace in. He doesn’t have to worry whether or not he can interact with his father every day as he had to worry with his mother.

At eight years old, he doesn’t know any better. Traitorously, Izuku still prefers his father over how his mother treated him during the last couple of years he spent with her.

With Sensei, he never has to wonder if he’s the loving, brilliant boy his mother loved so much, or the monstrous, conniving brat he was also called on her bad days.

All for One only ever sees Izuku as one thing: his son. And that’s never going to change.

There are shadows at each empty corner of the room. Izuku hears their whispering, feels the remnants of their quirks, and senses their impatience.

He doesn’t look, too afraid to find out what will happen if he does. It doesn’t matter, though, as the shadows slink around and make their way to the table, settling down all around.

Izuku sucks in a sharp breath. Endeavor and All Might are still looking at him, and the latter is currently whispering something into Izuku’s ear that he can’t hear.

They don’t see the shadows, and some part of Izuku is relieved.

“Izuku.”

He straightens up, recognizing the change in tone. “Yes, sir?”

“You weren’t scared of them, were you?” He doesn’t wait for his son’s response. “Of course you weren’t. You were merely scared by the potential consequences of fighting back—which is natural, I suppose. The educational system nowadays works best by scaring children into obedience

and silence. However…"

All for One swishes his drink and then sets it on the counter in front of Izuku. He walks so he's behind Izuku again.

Izuku tracks the feeling of his hundred or so powers as they wreathe around him like a cloak. It makes him shiver.

"Now that we've established there would be no consequences for you here if you did end up getting caught, I want you to think of who you want to become. Don't you want to hurt them? Don't you want to get them to stop?"

When Hawks enters the room, Izuku doesn't look at him. He stays how he is: stiff, unmoving, and barely breathing. Blood is pounding in his ears, making it difficult to think straight.

The shadows chitter at him, and All Might's touch on his shoulder leaves. He faintly hears the sound of his mentor laughing and greeting his coworker, and he can see the quick roll of the eye from Endeavor on the other side of the table, but his brain is all foggy still.

He should be putting on an act right now. He should be smiling and acting excited. He should seem *ecstatic* upon seeing Hawks show up.

But Izuku isn't. He can't bring himself to do it.

Because all he can think of is the feeling he got when he checked his phone yesterday after the mall. All he can remember right now is panic and fear and overwhelming guilt.

And there was something else there yesterday. Something more deep-rooted. Something more… *familiar.*

"If I get them to stop hurting me, they'll just target other students," Izuku whispers, shameful even to admit his reasoning aloud.

All for One clicks his tongue and rests his heavy hand on Izuku's head. His fingers gently massage the boy's scalp, working through the knots in his unruly curls. "Come now, I know even you are not so naive. You cannot truly believe that you are the only person they're harming." He sighs deeply. "You wallowing in silence isn't going to change the fact that they surely have other victims. What you're doing is what those fiction books of yours call martyrdom." He leans down so Izuku has no choice but to look at him again. "And that, my boy, is all useless. It is never worth it."

Izuku shrinks in on himself, shoulders hunching over. "I thought I was helping. I just wanted to save the others from it. I can—I can take the punches."

"You can. But the hard truth is that you are not their first victim, Izuku. And if you don't stop them now, know that you won't be their last." His fingers tighten their hold in Izuku's hair suddenly, keeping Izuku still. "I don't want to see another mark on you. Is that understood?"

The boy tries to nod, only to wince since his head is currently being held still. "Yes, sensei. I understand."

"Hurt them back the next time you see them. Make them stop. I don't care how you do it, but get it done. If you don't, I'll do something about those boys myself, and I'm sure you wouldn't want that." His next words are in a delighted whisper. His hot breath tickles Izuku's ear, almost as if in consolation. "You don't have to beat away all of your emotions, dear boy. You crave that violence, and I promise you that nothing bad will come of it. Just sink your teeth into it once, and you'll never go back."

Izuku swallows. He remembers his bullys' jeering taunts, their baseless insults, the way they made fun of Mom, the look on their faces when Izuku's head snapped to the side after the strike.

It was all too much. But even then, Izuku didn't hit back. He let it happen. He didn't say one word, even as one of them called his mother a bad, bad word—a word Kurogiri never lets Izuku say, not that he'd ever want to.

He was so… he was so angry then.

And now that his father is giving him the permission to act on that fire inside of him, now that he's practically being told to do it, to fight back… he relishes in the heat of it.

But still, Izuku's last bit of hesitance shines through, a beacon in the pitch black. "How do you know nothing bad will happen? How do you know I—I won't regret it?"

All for One's face softens, and the smile that tugs at his lips is so genuine that it takes Izuku's breath away. The man uses a thumb to wipe a speck of dirt off of Izuku's cheek, and when he speaks next, his voice is silky smooth and so, so right.

"Why, Izuku, because I *have never regretted it once."*

A shadow flits by Izuku's face, and wild, white eyes meet his green

ones as it zips away. The others follow right after, leaving Izuku cold, alone, and raw.

He isn't sure what he can do here.

Hawks has shown up to their dinner, already late, and is supposed to eat with them. He's supposed to stay for the full course! How can Izuku handle that? How is he supposed to remain calm in this situation?

Has Hawks come for a different reason? Did he somehow know Izuku would be here? Is he taking this opportunity to just rub what he did in Izuku's face?

Is this whole thing just for Hawks to spit out a *you can't do anything to me?*

Hawks invaded Club territory. He brutally injured a couple of the members there, including the Doctor.

Izuku can't just let that go. What if—

Shock hits Izuku like a slap in the face. His head snaps up, and his breath leaves him. The emotion isn't his own, though; it belongs to Hawks.

Izuku still has his back to the hero, who is now walking forward after greeting All Might to find a chair. He doesn't see him yet, but he senses his quirk and his emotions now that he's been brought back from his memories. The man is *surprised.*

Has been for a good thirty seconds now. And it feels real. It's not fake! At least, not that Izuku can tell.

Hawks is genuinely… shocked that Izuku is here? Really? Izuku can't sense any negative emotions coming from him yet, and he's searching hard.

Izuku analyzes the room and Endeavor and All Might's reactions, trying to judge whether there could be anything else happening that might make Hawks this shocked. He can't find anything—unless, of course, Hawks has seen the weird pool table off to the side and is interested in it.

But that's unlikely. No, the most obvious thing is that Izuku is the one causing his sudden emotional upheaval.

He almost doesn't believe it at first. It's just too much of a coincidence. How could Hawks be here for any reason other than Izuku? Is he narcissistic to think that?

Doesn't matter if he knew or not, kid, Shimura tells him. *He's here now, so we've gotta deal with it. The rest can come later.*

Deal with it? How exactly is he supposed to do that?

"Midoriya," All Might prompts, pushing Izuku on the shoulder. "Why don't you say hello?"

Izuku stares at him, appalled, before realizing that All Might probably isn't aware of what happened at the Club yesterday. Only Yamada and Aizawa know, and Izuku isn't sure if they ever had time to tell All Might between then and now. To be fair, Izuku didn't say anything to him either. Why would he? All Might really isn't involved in Club stuff like Aizawa is, being a newly appointed member and all.

Actually, now that he's thinking about it, was All Might ever told about how Hawks picked Izuku up that night after being drugged? Izuku can't remember, but if he does know about it, All Might is putting on one hell of a show by acting so nonchalant.

Izuku regrets not telling him about the whole Hawks thing that happened yesterday.

Maybe this could've been avoided if he had. Maybe All Might would've allowed Izuku to leave the moment Endeavor mentioned Hawks as his guest. Or, better yet, both of them would've skedaddled.

Hawks finally moves inside Izuku's vision, and the boy notices he's still in his hero costume. He has his glasses on his forehead and his gloves still on, telling Izuku he must've just finished a mission.

He swears he can see little droplets of blood on the man's tan jacket. He's not going to be the one to point it out, though. It's more than likely the result of a personal job given directly by the Commission.

"Heya, kid! Long time no see, right?" Hawks greets, which is just the final nail in the coffin.

The last phrase is all Izuku needed to know for sure that Hawks has already pieced together his identity. Just fantastic.

I'm going to get killed soon.

Izuku forces himself to face the hero, smoothing his expression down as much as possible. He must not do a very good job, as Hawks makes a weird face upon seeing him. “Yeah,” is all Izuku can say for now. “It’s been a while.”

“Oh, you two have met before?” All Might implores, glancing between Izuku and Hawks.

Izuku doesn’t have a reply, as they truly haven’t met before outside of him being Rabbit.

“Ah, only in passing!” Hawks says cheerfully, the lie slipping easily from his tongue. “I gave ‘im an autograph once. Believe me, I never forget a face. Especially not one belonging to this kid right here! He’s the winner of that flashy Sports Fest, right?”

That was Kacchan, Izuku mentally corrects, his nerves igniting immediately when Hawks pats him on the back a few times. He can’t tell if it was an honest mistake or if Hawks did it on purpose just to piss Izuku off.

He wouldn’t be surprised either way.

“Er, Young Midoriya here did place second!” All Might exclaims, awkward. “He did a great job.”

Press your panic button, Shinomori advises suddenly, making Izuku jolt.

Banjou snorts. *What, and have the whole police force come knocking down the door? That’s a terrible idea.*

I agree, mumbles En. *We should let this play out first.*

Play out? The second voice cuts in, disbelieving. *And what happens when Hawks decides to do something rash? What then? The boy just sits here like a waiting duck and takes it?*

Shimura is quick to interject, her warm tone a soothing balm on Izuku’s prickling skin. *Toshinori is with him. Do you idiots really think Hawks would do anything with both All Might and Endeavor at the table? I doubt he has bad intentions here anyway. The best option is to act normal. Staying friendly will decrease the odds of any violence happening.*

Friendly? Is she really asking Izuku to be friendly with Hawks? Come on! Does she not know what he’s done?

She's lucky Izuku hasn't tried to stab his knife through Hawks' eye yet. Would he succeed if he tries? No. Would it be worth it? Izuku is uncertain. A trial would need to be conducted.

Second speaks again, sounding disdainful. *Yeah, the only violence I can foresee now is from our precious little successor. Better tell him to be careful, or else we'll have a bigger problem on our hands.*

"Oh, mind if I sit next to you, Midoriya?" Hawks asks, all bright and cheerful.

Izuku fists the fabric of his pants, jaw tightening. Before he can reply, though, All Might speaks up. "I think he'd actually enjoy some space for himself, if you don't mind." The hero grins wryly, a twinkle to his eye. "Besides, Endeavor is looking a little lonely over there, I'll say!"

Endeavor barks something about how he'd rather not have Hawks next to him either, which makes the winged man laugh good-naturedly before making his way over to him. Despite Endeavor's heat, Hawks ends up sitting diagonally to him on his left side in a similar fashion to how Izuku is seated by All Might. This way, the two seats next to Izuku on the left are empty and Hawks is on the other side of the table.

More importantly, as far away from Izuku as possible.

Thankfully, the waitress returns with their appetizers just in time and brings with her the first dishes of their pre-set course.

Everything is hot and fresh, and it smells delicious. Izuku wishes the circumstances were different so he could enjoy it all properly. It looks like a scene straight out of a movie! Steam is coming off of the plates, and everything is sizzling and popping. Even the soups are still roiling!

The waitress promises to be right back with a Coke for Endeavor and a plain water with lemon for Hawks as requested, leaving the group of four to start on their meal.

"Talk about perfect timing!" Hawks laughs, elbowing Endeavor obnoxiously. "Glad I didn't miss the food coming out!"

"You should've not bothered to come at all," Endeavor mutters, glaring down at his plates and already starting to dig in after a quick prayer.

Izuku gets the fleeting urge to hurt both of them. His muscles don't seem to want to stop being tense. He's frozen to his seat with the world around him appearing in striking clarity. It's like there's a high definition film over it all.

All Might clears his throat quietly and bumps Izuku's leg, making the boy look up. He follows Yagi's example and puts his hands together to give a quick thanks for the food.

Maybe eating will distract him from the growing pains in his chest.

That's not something to gloss over, En comments.

Let him keep living in his fantasy world, Shimura tells her master with a crumpled sigh. *He'll learn soon enough.*

Izuku isn't sure what he's supposed to learn, and he says as much, but he receives no reply.

And so for a good portion of the dinner, Izuku stuffs his face as an excuse to not take part in any of the ongoing conversations. He either eye fucks his food until even he becomes uncomfortable or stares off into space—that is, space in any direction that's not close to where Hawks is seated.

Izuku knows that ignoring Hawks so clearly won't help his case or prove to the winged hero that he won't be beaten, but he also doesn't really care right now. He's ignoring him not because he's scared of him, but because he's scared of what might happen if he doesn't ignore him.

If Endeavor and All Might weren't around, best believe that Izuku would be handling things differently. Because of the two heroes' presence, Izuku has to watch himself carefully. He doesn't know the full extent of what Hawks knows. He doesn't want to do something that may end with him wearing a prison suit by the end of the night, or, worse, put All Might at risk.

Izuku has to admit it: if Hawks actually planned this out and knew Izuku would be here, he's a terrific manipulator. Here, Izuku is trapped with no way out. Hawks could use this as an opportunity to reveal Rabbit's identity. And with Endeavor here, there's no way Izuku will be able to get out of it. Not even All Might could stop it! Though Izuku isn't sure he even would, as he has to save face after all.

Hawks could set up a situation where the only options for Izuku are to

reveal that he *is* in fact Rabbit or to play dumb and look cowardly. Either way, Hawks comes out on top.

Sure, Izuku could excuse himself right now before any of that happens and try to make a run for it, but could he really outrun Hawks? Someone who's dubbed the fastest man in Japan and perhaps even in the world? He can fly at speeds over two hundred miles an hour! And that's only his highest *recorded* speed! There's no telling how much faster he is in private settings.

Izuku bets his max is in the three hundreds somewhere.

Now, Rabbit may have been called one of the fastest quirk users a few times in the media due to how quickly he's managed to escape top-ranked heroes in the past, but Izuku isn't so egotistical to think he has Hawks beat. Not by a long shot! At least, not with how Izuku is now.

Even All Might is second to Hawks in reference to pure speed, and most can't even track All Might with their eyes when he's moving using full power. Plus, All Might can only move at his maximum speed for a short time while Hawks can fly for a hell of a lot longer.

Izuku shivers to himself just imagining being chased by Hawks. Yeah, the twenty-two year old may lack physical prowess, but his speed is a real game changer.

"Cold, kid?" Hawks asks, fixing Izuku with his bright golden gaze. He picks a piece of pork from between his teeth. "Ya know, the thermostat is in this room, so we could change the temp."

"I'm fine, thanks," Izuku says, only glancing up at him for a brief moment. He picks up his chopsticks again after sipping his drink and goes for another meatball. "I like the cold."

Hawks nods. "I bet you do! I heard teenagers nowadays love to hole up in their cold and dark rooms all the time—kinda like bunnies hibernating for the winter." He perks up and flashes Endeavor a wide-eyed look. "Does your son prefer the cold too?"

Izuku is glad the attention is now on Endeavor, as the nice set of chopsticks in his hand snaps in half immediately upon registering the bunnies comment. *Rabbits don't hibernate, you fucking idiot,* Izuku hisses internally. *We're active all year around. Can you be any more obvious?*

With a grunt, Endeavor takes the bait. "My youngest son likes to have

a balance of both coolness and warmth. He doesn't prefer one over the other."

Izuku can't hold himself back this time. Hearing something so wrong about his friend just rubs Izuku the wrong way. "Todoroki does prefer the cold, actually, since he naturally runs hot all over."

His fire is more powerful than his ice, so even though he doesn't use his left side as much, he still runs at a higher temperature than normal people, just as Izuku is sure Endeavor does.

"Did he tell you that?" Endeavor asks, full of contempt.

Izuku shrugs. "Didn't have to. I just notice that kinda stuff."

"Well, stop noticing," Endeavor commands, eating more off his plate. "Or else you'll continue being wrong."

Giving a small salute, Izuku follows Endeavor's example and tries the soup in front of him. It's creamy and savory, and Izuku finds that he could eat this three times a day for the rest of his life and not get sick of it. What is it called again? Maybe he'll tell Yamada about it.

"Speaking of Young Todoroki," All Might begins, "he's been doing extremely well in his recent battle exercises. You should be proud."

"That's no surprise to me," Endeavor mutters, though he actually looks at All Might as he speaks this time, telling Izuku that he does care for All Might's opinions on his son.

"Even still," All Might responds easily. "It's always nice to recognize his accomplishments. He's a fast learner, and he's also using his fire more, which aids him greatly. The world will benefit from his drive."

Endeavor *hmphs* and doesn't say anything more.

"Oh, I'll say!" Hawks blurts out, wings puffing up in excitement. It sets Izuku on edge. "Little Todoroki's performance at the festival was sure something. I was getting goosebumps just watching it from my phone." He picks up his own bowl of soup and slurps the rest of it down. "Too bad he got beat by Midoriya there at the end. It was a good fight."

"He won by luck," Endeavor says immediately, eyes sharp like flint. "The only reason my son lost is because he was blown off the platform. If they had kept fighting physically, it's clear to anyone with

a brain that Midoriya would've been beaten."

The air in the room seems to go up a few degrees in time with Endeavor's fiery claim, and All Might lifts up a hand out of nerves. "Now, I don't think—"

Izuku cuts his mentor off without even meaning to. "Yeah." He pops another meatball in his mouth and avoids their gaze. "That's right."

All three heroes stare at him in silence for a moment. Hawks is looking at him with something unidentifiable in his expression, and Izuku forces himself to try and envision that invisible thread between them so he can feel more of Hawks' emotions.

Endeavor is the first to break the silence, sounding slightly suspicious. "You agree?"

Izuku chews thoughtfully. "Why wouldn't I?" At their questioning looks, Izuku continues nervously. "At the time of our fight, I wasn't really in my best health. I was sloppy. Even if I was feeling better, Todoroki still would've had more firepower than me since I wouldn't have been able to afford using a higher amount of my energy stores. My plan was to tire Todoroki out by getting him angry enough to use both of his sides, uh, intermittently. If that makes sense," he adds lamely.

Hawks nods to himself. "Huh. Not a bad plan."

The tips of Izuku's ears turn red. "I, er, figured that as long as I kept provoking him and avoiding his attacks, he would eventually run out of stamina and make a mistake. That mistake would give me the opportunity to hit him hard enough to blow him back."

"But you underestimated the speed of Todoroki's attacks," All Might offers, brows furrowed as he remembers the fight. "He was attacking you quite fast with his ice precisely so you wouldn't get the chance to get close. He was keeping you at a distance."

Endeavor cuts in with his eyes on his plate. He sounds nonchalant when he speaks. "That is because Shouto refuses to be a close-range fighter as of this moment. He feels he works better as a long-range hero, as he can use his ice to subdue pretty much any opponent. Except for power types, that is." When he looks up, his gaze pierces into Izuku. "You and Shouto both have the opportunity to fight long and close range. You used shots of air from your fingers to break the ice he sent your way before it could touch you, and you also used

your fists and legs to send it back at him, didn't you? Shouto could mirror that if he only decided to get closer to his opponents. Against someone like you, who has a hell of a lot of energy to back up a punch, he could still hold his own with his fire alone, as—"

"The fire can give him extra speed to increase his force at the moment of impact," Izuku says, his leg beginning to bounce in excitement. "If he could cover his hands with it, similar to your Fire Fist, he could have sent me flying off the platform in a way that I wouldn't have been able to avoid."

"Shouto used his ice to keep him in place against your air attacks, which was a smart move. But you don't have that kind of luxury," Endeavor notes.

"No," Izuku agrees, now thinking hard. "I actually relied a lot on him to *send* me some large chunks of his ice in order to ground myself. That's why I didn't smash some of them completely. I wanted them to stay behind me so I could use them as walls. Right now, I haven't figured out a way yet to keep myself from going backwards if pushed with nothing behind me to help."

"Your air shots put a lot of pressure on your fingers, yes?"

Izuku nods jerkily. "Yes, sir! That's why I don't really do them a lot if I don't have to. I prefer close combat if I don't have support weapons or a staff. That way I can spread my power throughout my entire body instead of focusing it to only come out of one area. It harms my body way less that way."

"Won't that hurt more, though?" Hawks asks, looking between Endeavor and Izuku.

Izuku shakes his head. "Not as much as completely breaking a finger would hurt. The aches on my muscles are better than bone breaks."

"Where you went wrong," Endeavor begins suddenly, "is you spent too much time trying to provoke Shouto. You would've been better off exploiting my son's refusal to use his fire. It would've been easier to win."

"I was trying to tire him out," Izuku reminds, almost bashfully. "I didn't want to risk him trying to send another glacier my way."

All Might gives a considerable nod. "It was a big glacier."

“In those instances, and with what you were working with, you must use your environment to your advantage,” Endeavor says. “You could have made quicker work of Shouto had you been more aggressive.”

“I would’ve risked getting pushed out, though,” Izuku counters.

“You only really got close to him as a last ditch effort, and even then it nearly cost you the win. That’s not going to fly in the real world.” Endeavor holds Izuku’s bright, eager gaze. “When an opponent forces you in a position you don't excel in, you force *them* into a position he isn’t comfortable with to level the playing field. Then it’s just a matter of skill. Which, if you’re a hero, I’d hope that you’d be more skilled than a villain.”

Izuku recalls the fight in his mind, seeing it all in blurry colors in front of him. “So… force Todoroki to get away from his ice walls? Push him closer to the edges of the platform to make him frantic?”

“You nearly succeeded in provoking him to move out of his areas, but you didn’t do enough. In the future, you must be assertive with criminals. Don’t hesitate, and definitely don’t waste your time trying to talk them into using more of their power.” At this, Endeavor rolls his eyes. “That was the most illogical thing I’ve ever seen during a UA Sports Festival.”

Izuku isn’t satisfied yet, though. He needs more advice. This is the first time he’s gotten comprehensive feedback about his fights at the festival. “But what if Todoroki would have just kept making his ice walls? How would I counter that without just doing a repeat of what happened the first time?”

As Izuku continues speaking with Endeavor, eventually moving onto his fight with Kacchan, Hawks and All Might share confused glances. Izuku pays them little mind, however, as he’s instead listening to every word of Endeavor’s.

His advice is detailed, logical, and actually attainable. It applies to Izuku specifically and his power type, which makes the boy excited to try out what Endeavor suggests in the future.

Endeavor seems to truly understand what Izuku is going through with his quirk.

“I’m hoping to get even better with my control so that I can perhaps maneuver through the air. If I had that ability then, maybe I could’ve gotten to Todoroki much easier.” Izuku taps his chin. “That would’ve

been great."

"I use my fire to propel myself," Endeavor tells him. "Fighting midair requires an entirely different way to train, but you'd be a formidable opponent if you mastered the technique. Especially when directing your punches downwards—gravity will do most of the work then and help create a dozen openings."

When Izuku starts to vibrate in his chair with excitement, the next course of their dinner comes out. It's their main entrées this time, along with a nice large salad to share, and Izuku is even more impressed.

He takes out his phone and snaps a quick picture to send to Yamada, grinning like an idiot. Except his flash was on and made everyone at the table look at him weirdly.

Hawks flashes a thumbs up at him. "Gotta remember the food forever, yeah?"

All Might just nudges Izuku gently and whispers, "Send that to me?" The boy nods in return. He didn't think All Might was one to take a lot of pictures until this morning when he caught the man taking a bunch of photos of the city from his balcony.

Apparently he has a private, anonymous account on a few social media sites where he just posts pictures of food and nature. It's kind of sweet.

Izuku got a chance to see his phone and was delighted to see that he had about ten different albums in his photo gallery labeled a variety of things.

Who knew that All Might was the type?

Endeavor rolls his eyes again, and Izuku stops himself from telling him that his eyes will get stuck like that if he does it too many times, as Aizawa tells him that on the daily. "I can't believe my son is friends with a delinquent like you," the man mutters, and Izuku is only mildly offended.

"I feel like you've said that before," Izuku says.

Endeavor ignores him in favor of his steamed fish, not that Izuku can blame him. It does look quite delicious.

“So, Hawks,” All Might begins after a comfortable while. “How are things at your agency going? Not too busy, I hope!”

“Ah, everything’s always busy over here, but it’s been alright! Never a boring day, I’ll tell ya.” Hawks winks at the other blond. “‘Sides, I kinda like it better that way. Keeps things fresh and all. I’m sure you can understand that, Number One.”

All Might laughs quietly. “Not always. Sometimes it’s nice to not have anything going on.”

“It’s far more worrisome when there’s nothing but silence,” Endeavor cuts in, matter-of-fact. He stabs a piece of his food and brings it to his mouth.

Izuku feels his lip curl at the sound of him crunching on it. Sometimes if he focuses too hard and lets his senses take over, everything gets to be too much. Chewing is definitely something he can’t handle in high definition. It makes him cringe.

“I agree!” Hawks points his chopsticks at Izuku suddenly. “As a matter of fact, I haven’t heard a lot of news from UA lately. My intern hasn’t told me much, so how’s your class really been doing, Midoriya? I know things can’t be easy after what happened at that training facility at the beginning of the year.”

It’s said so upbeatly that you wouldn’t have even been able to guess Hawks was talking about the USJ attack. Izuku’s grip on his own chopsticks falters, and his slice of beef falls back onto his plate, splashing sauce on his suit.

Ouch, En comments.

Yeah, Izuku feels the same way.

All Might pushes Izuku’s pleated napkin more towards him and answers quickly, sounding nervous. “Our students are doing just fine. They have thankfully been able to grow from their experiences and become stronger, you see. They’re quite adaptable.”

Hawks looks pleased. His feathers on his left wing twitch. Izuku wonders what that could mean. “I bet!” He assures. “But I wanna hear it from the kid. I’m sure it’s still hard for Class 1-A, especially *Midoriya.* I mean, he’s the one who interacted the most with that creature, right?”

The innocent words don't fool Izuku. Instead, it spreads a thick paste all over the inside of his intestines and quickly sparks a flame.

All Might glances quickly at Izuku before gesturing with his hands. "Actually, maybe we shouldn't—"

"Nomu," Izuku says. He feels all three heroes' gazes on him now. Endeavor is interested too, evidently.

"Huh?" Hawks asks.

Izuku pushes his last piece of beef in the pool of red blood it left behind. "The creature was a Nomu. Same as the ones from Hosu, only better." The silence stretches on for far too long in Izuku's opinion, so the boy continues. He doesn't like the concerned way in which All Might is looking at him. "Maybe not as complex, but it, uh, was stronger. Faster."

More *complete.*

Hawks puts his elbows on the table and holds his head up with a hand on his chin. "Oh, yeah? That must've been a bitch to take down. How'd you manage to fight it?"

It's clear what he's really asking: *why didn't you die?*

The fire burns brighter inside Izuku, eating away at his organs until all that's left is the ashes. He feels the heat bubbling up under his skin, and he forces himself to take a gulp of water to calm himself once more.

Hawks' gaze is bright. It makes Izuku angry. "I mean, it's a feat to even have seen it and survived, so how did you—"

"I think we can push this topic to a later date, yes?" All Might interrupts, though he's not really asking. "Looks like they're bringing out the next course!"

By the time the waitress has left again and brought refills, Izuku has had time to stew. He's had time to kindle the spark inside him to be something more.

And so, when Hawks has just taken a bite of grilled chicken, Izuku stares at him. "Can I have your autograph, sir?"

"Autograph? I'm flattered, but I thought I already gave you one," the

man answers suavely, continuing the lie he made up earlier—probably in hopes to corner Izuku further.

“This is for a friend, actually.” Izuku pulls out a mini notebook of his own and a golden pen to match it. He slides it across the table, not breaking his gaze once. “He’d just die if he got to have a signature from you.”

Hawks laughs modestly and gives in immediately. “Guess I can’t say no to that. I’m always open to please a fan!” He picks up the pen and takes off the cap with his teeth. “And what would this friend’s name be?”

“Keigo.”

There’s not a single crack in Hawks’ expression as he dutifully writes his quote and signs his name. When he looks up, he looks gleeful, but Izuku can just about see the newfound sharpness to his gaze. He’s on alert now—he can sense it in the air. Hawks feels like the moment before you wrap your finger around the trigger of a gun.

Endeavor is eating and currently checking his phone, unaware of what’s going on. All Might is eating, too, though he gives Izuku another confused and almost hurt glance at the mention of his supposed ‘friend.’

They’re oblivious, and for good reason. Only a handful of people know who Hawks is and where he came from.

The people who know didn’t get that information by asking, that’s for sure.

“There we go!” Hawks says, but Izuku isn’t finished.

“Oh, and if it’s not too much trouble, could you write his last name, too? I want to make sure it’s really personal.” Izuku leans a little more over the table, making sure his eyes are boring into Hawks’ own. Izuku isn’t sure why he’s doing this, and he’s probably going to pay for this very, very soon, but it’s like the aches inside him just have a mind of their own.

Hawks never forgets a face, right? That’s what he said. Izuku wants it to be true. He doesn’t want Hawks to ever forget his eyes.

At the hero’s nod, Izuku lowers his voice, sickly sweet. “It’s Takami.”

The pen pauses, hovering over the notebook paper. Hawks' hand stays motionless for a tiny fraction of a second, his expression never changing and his signature smile never slipping. He's good at that; pretending. Izuku thinks briefly that Hawks is everything All for One wanted his son to be.

For some reason, this just makes Izuku hate Hawks more.

After only another moment, Hawks scrawls the rest of the name onto the paper—using different characters than his actual one, Izuku notes—and hands the notebook back. "That's an interesting name there," Hawks says, and when he meets Izuku's gaze again, the boy almost flinches back at the intensity in those honey-colored eyes. While his face is all cheery and bright, his eyes promise something dark. It's such a weird combination.

Beyond that, though, Izuku can see *something* in there. Something raw. Something…

"Tell your friend he's lucky," Hawks finishes, jeering.

Izuku flashes a toothy smile. "I will, thanks! He'll love this."

He loves it too much already, actually. Izuku can tell just by looking at him.

You're going to get yourself killed, idiot, Banjou hisses, and it sounds like it's going directly into Izuku's ears. *Don't you got a shred of survival skills?*

Thankfully, Shimura answers for him. *You've been watching him for months now and you're really going to ask that?*

"So," All Might says next, lifting up his glass. "I have to say, I'm surprised you've even stayed this long, Todoroki. It's really nice to be talking with you."

"Keep reminding me and I'll leave," Endeavor responds.

"Aw, and miss all the fun here?" Hawks teases, though this time his sarcasm has a bite to it. Izuku watches him carefully, the hairs on the back of his neck and on his arm beginning to stand up. His stomach coils, and the temperature drops immediately even with Endeavor's fire still in effect.

The sudden change has Izuku's heart rate increasing even more.

“Couldn’t be me,” the winged hero continues. He leans back in his chair and stretches out his wings with a *whoosh,* nearly whacking Endeavor in the face. His feathers fluff up individually, one by one, and a timer starts to tick down in Izuku’s mind. It almost sounds like a threat. “I‘m never one to pass up a good *chat* with a few friends.”

The way his voice changes on the word ‘chat’ has Izuku’s muscles seizing up. His breath escapes him without his permission, almost like a subconscious reaction, and the next thing he sees is one of those dastardly feathers of Hawks *hardening.* It sharpens and allows light to reflect off of it, turning into a fucking sword. At the same time, Hawks moves to stand, and—

And Izuku doesn’t think. He just reacts.

The knife on his right screams for attention, and Izuku goes for it. But, quicker than Izuku can foresee, All Might slams his hand down to cover Izuku’s, halting his attempt and pinning his hand to the table. The smack rattles the table and causes the knife to fall right off the edge of it.

Shit. Izuku looks up and sees Hawks and Endeavor watching with opposite expressions. Endeavor looks judgmental yet surprisingly understanding, and Hawks is still stretching with a polite grin on his tanned face. He’s already sinking back down in his seat, a few red baby feathers falling with him.

His hardened sword is now back to normal, and it happened so fast that it’s as if it never happened.

“You good, Number One?” Hawks asks.

“I saw a fly!” All Might lies, laughing naturally. “It was a big one, my apologies. You go on!” After he says this, he removes his hand from on top of Izuku’s. When he’s sure no one else is looking, he gives the boy a deadly, *meaningful* glare. If he could talk right now, Izuku has a few guesses as to what he would be saying.

His blue eyes are hard and threatening, making Izuku swallow and look away. Actually, All Might doesn’t even need to speak to get his message across. He clearly figured out what Izuku was doing, and he now must be aware of the tension between him and Hawks.

All Might picks up the knife from the floor and sets it off to the side, away from Izuku, for the waiter to replace.

And, okay, *perhaps* Izuku jumped the gun a little on that one. But can you blame him? What if Hawks was actually going to do something? What if he was about to kill one of them? He's fast and unhinged! He could've done it! It's always better to overreact than underreact, Izuku thinks.

He can't just be acting paranoid, can he? He has good reasons to be this way, right?

"You're seeing things, All Might," Endeavor says. "It seems both you and that brat need to have an exam conducted, and fast."

All Might opens his mouth to reply, only for his phone to ring loudly from his jacket pocket. Izuku recognizes it as an alarm, and he blinks in surprise at just how fast the blond yanks out his phone to see the notification for it.

Immediately after reading it, All Might is standing up, near transparent steam rolling off of him in response. His chair almost falls back, but thankfully he catches it in time. Flushed, he looks first at Izuku and then at his coworkers. "I must go. I apologize, but I'm being called in for a fight a few cities from here!" He looks back down at his phone again, and his features are illuminated by the blue light.

Endeavor is on his feet, too, all business. "A fight? It must be bad if they're asking for you. I will go."

"They're only asking for me specifically since it's a water-type villain," All Might says, shaking his head fervently. "Having you there will be too much, I think."

Izuku senses the opportunity and doesn't let it slide. "Can I—!"

He hasn't even finished his question before All Might is speaking. "Absolutely not!" His words are no-nonsense. "You need to stay put, and I mean it."

Hawks walks around the table and puts a hand on Izuku's shoulder, making Izuku freeze. "No worries, chief! I'll make sure he stays safe."

At this, All Might hesitates. He stares at Hawks and Izuku, and he seems torn. His body looks like it's itching to leave, to shoot out of this restaurant already, but on the other hand, it's like he can't move yet.

He doesn't really trust Hawks either, does he? Or, rather, maybe he

just doesn't trust Izuku?

This uncertainty has Izuku biting the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. All Might is needed somewhere, and yet he's wasting time by worrying about Izuku. It's highly illogical!

Making a split second decision, All Might looks back at Endeavor, voice taking on more of a pleading tone. It has Izuku's head snapping up to stare at him in shock.

"Todoroki, could you watch my student until I am able to get back? I shouldn't be too long if I leave now."

What.

The flame hero doesn't seem to take it any better. "You want me to babysit this runt?" He scoffs and crosses his burly arms, eye twitching. "As if I'd ever lower myself to—"

"You'd be surprised how much trouble he attracts in a short time frame. I believe you'll find yourself enjoying the challenge." All Might turns to face him fully. "Please. You know I wouldn't be asking if I didn't think it'd be worth your time. I will leave you alone until our next conference together, I can promise you that!"

"Stupid bribes aren't going to—"

"I won't talk to you even at the conferences then!"

Endeavor snaps his mouth shut, beyond annoyed. He grinds his teeth a few times before seeming to reach a conclusion, and he huffs and sits back down in his seat, waving him off with a hand. "Whatever. Know that you'll owe me more than that."

"Ah, *thank you!"* All Might leaves quickly after patting Izuku once on the head and ordering him once more to *stay,* which has got to be the rudest thing he's ever done to his successor.

Izuku is going to sulk for days over this. Stay? What is he, a chihuahua?

Hawks calls after him cheerfully even though he probably knows he won't be heard. "Don't worry, I'll eat your dessert for you!"

Izuku, upon realizing Hawks is still touching his shoulder and hovering over him, shrugs the man's hand off. With the feeling of All

Might getting further and further away as he runs to wherever he needs to be, Izuku has never felt colder. He's never felt more… vulnerable. And it's a weird thing, being left alone with Hawks and Endeavor and the shadows residing in the walls.

Here, Izuku has stepped into mine territory. He's deep in it. He is mere steps away from killing himself. All it takes is one misstep. One slip up.

But then the more he thinks about it, the more he realizes that this… this is actually great. No, it's wonderful. Fucking fantastic, even. Because now All Might is gone, preoccupied with a mission for at least twenty minutes or so, and Endeavor is the most irritated he's been tonight, telling Izuku that the chances of him leaving early now are high.

Which means it could be just Izuku and Hawks. Alone.

Movement catches Izuku's eye. He tracks a droplet of condensation as it slides down his fresh grape soda. He feels Hawks' wings so close behind him, and Extract practically purrs. Their presence is a drug, and Izuku just knows that they'd be the perfect fit for him. They'd probably be compatible with that stupid wings factor he acquired.

Hawks whistles and sits on the same side of the table as Izuku this time, only one seat away. Izuku burns even brighter.

Those are the wings that were used to tear the doctor and the other club members nearly apart. The realization is like a slap to a fresh sunburn. It makes him… yearn for it, almost. The stinging pain.

He's been away from his job for so long that he's nearly forgotten what the sound of fists against bone sounds like. And as he sits there, fingers twitching, eyes staring off into the distance, he hears it again.

That voice from before. The one he couldn't identify. The one all around him. The voice he likes to listen to without much thought at all because it just feels so *right*.

While the voice was scary before, now it only feels *good*.

He should do it. He senses it. He can hear the voice telling him to just do it. To do what he does best and keep the order *he* created. To maintain the system *he* helped to build.

Number three hero or not, Hawks is stepping on Izuku's progress. On

his aims. On everything he's been cultivating. And he just won't quit. He won't get his damn beak out of Izuku's business. Whether it's because of orders from the Commission or not, Izuku doesn't care.

Hawks is precisely the kind of threat his father told him to face head on or else worse things would come.

And sometimes, Izuku thinks softly, not all of the advice All for One gave him was bad.

He takes one breath in and releases it through his mouth. He silences the other quirks buzzing around inside his mind, not wanting any of the vestiges' opinions or input right now.

And he smiles.

Chapter End Notes

things are happening next □ stay tuned for the next episode of keeping up with izuku and the very real voices inside his head

also I got my acceptance letter for a college I applied for :) i know I've said this before but I genuinely can't believe I started writing this in freshman year and am now currently setting things up to go to college in less than a year. it's rlly wild. time really does fly (it actually doesnt. I hate every day of high school and graduation can't come fast enough)

ALSO also we are so very close to hitting 700k hits and I'm sinking into the floor with joy. thank y'all so much for sticking with this for so long!

anyway real talk love yourself and love your friends and don't forget to tell them you love them every chance you get 🐐 stay goated

e

edge of creation

Chapter Notes

600k words just about □

(cw: minor spoilers for hawks' backstory; manipulation)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When did Izuku decide to start running? He can't remember.

There had to have been a specific moment. That's how these things work. And yet, for all of Izuku's experiences and bad memories, he doesn't know.

Maybe it was when his mother first slapped him. He fell back when it happened, palms flat against the tile of the kitchen, and cried. Before Inko could do much of anything, Izuku had run away to his room.

It could've been then. Or maybe it was earlier than that. Maybe it was when he first noticed how strong Kacchan was when they were playing on the big kids' playground. Kacchan was bigger than Izuku, and he pulled miles ahead of everyone else. Izuku didn't want to be left behind, so his only option was to sprint to catch up so he wouldn't be forgotten.

But that's not fair to say, is it? Those times were understandable. Izuku ran from his mother back then because he was scared, and he ran after Kacchan all those times because he was determined to reach him.

That's not what he's talking about. What Izuku is trying to figure out is when he first decided to *hide?*

Why did he ever start running away from his opportunities? Why does he always turn tail and flee, knowing his destination probably won't be better than staying? Why is it that whenever there's a situation that doesn't just involve his own safety, Izuku crumbles?

He figures his father had something to do with it. Or maybe Stain. It pisses him off just thinking of the two of them. Izuku doesn't like that he can't say he's fucked up because of his *own* choices. No, if anyone knew the truth about him, they'd probably say he was screwed up by *them.*

Why is it always about All for One? Why does Stain haunt Izuku at every corner store in Japan despite being gone now?

Everything always leads back to his father, and Izuku hates that that's one thing he can't escape. Just once he'd like to be able to say he fucked *himself* up and have someone agree with him.

Maybe then he'd have the courage to stop running, to stop hiding, to stop pretending to be something he's not. If he tells Aizawa, would he agree with Izuku? Would he be honest with him?

Izuku will keep him in mind. As bitchy as the man is, he's never lied to Izuku about logical things.

Before Izuku dies, he'll ask Aizawa and get his answer.

"Oy, you going to eat that?" Hawks leans over and stabs at Izuku's piece of lava cake. "It's getting cold, ya know."

Izuku opens his eyes. The platter of various desserts that sits in front of him doesn't look as appetizing as it should. Maybe if his anger left him, his appetite would come to life once more.

When he turns, he sees Endeavor eating his fill with a kind of annoyed air around him that tells Izuku he's not happy about this arrangement either. He'd much rather be out fighting, without a doubt.

Izuku can't say he doesn't feel similarly.

The difference between the two of them now, however, is that Izuku is going to do something about his emotions.

He stands from the table after discreetly swiping the knife All Might left on the table. "I'll be back."

Endeavor grunts. "Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

"Didn't you just go?" He asks, one eyebrow raised.

Izuku pauses at the door and looks back. "I paid someone to put laxatives in your drink as a joke before you arrived. Turns out they put it in the wrong one, and now I'm paying for it." Saying this, he puts a hand to his stomach.

Hawks bursts out laughing immediately, only to choke on the cream

puff in his mouth. Endeavor doesn't seem so amused, though.

"If you're not back in a reasonable amount of time, I'll beat you myself," he warns, and the uncaring tone that was once carrying his words is gone, now replaced with something akin to how All Might was speaking to Izuku. The flame hero brings food to his mouth and doesn't bother looking at Izuku as he continues. "Someone has to teach you to take authority seriously, at least."

The change in Endeavor's demeanor reminds Izuku why he disliked him so much in the first place. But, now, Izuku guesses he can't really blame him. All Might told Endeavor to watch him, so of course he's going to be hesitant about Izuku leaving his sight.

Izuku doesn't think Endeavor wants to find out what All Might will do if he loses him.

Oh, well. Izuku's sympathy can only extend so far in this case. Endeavor can surely take any consequence.

Izuku puts a peace sign up to his eye and flashes a bright grin at the man. "Aye, sir!"

And with that, Izuku whisks away, hands in his pockets. The crystal doors shut behind him, and he finds his way to the bathrooms without issue this time.

If he wants to leave, he has to do it some other way. He can't go out the front entrance, as there are security guards watching and they'll surely become suspicious. He also can't go out the back way, as he'd have to go through the kitchen. The vents are too small to fit through, too.

So, bathroom it is.

There's only one man in it when he arrives, so Izuku takes his time in order for the guy to leave first.

When he doesn't sense anyone else coming to use the bathroom, he decides it's safe. He locks the door just to give himself extra time and picks the folded, fancy towels up off the counter. He twists them up and lays them down to cover up the small space between the floor and the bottom of the door.

That will help to minimize sound.

Izuku eyes the tiny, frosted windows at the very top of the wall near the ceiling. There's only one lock on it, and it looks simple enough. This makes Izuku smile to himself.

They really are making this too easy for him, aren't they? It's like they're begging for him to ruin their day. Also, who puts windows in a bathroom?

"Oh, look who's back!"

"Hah! I can't believe he even showed up today after what we did to him yesterday. He must want seconds!"

It's practiced this time, the way Izuku lets them grab his shirt and drag him to a more secluded spot, away from the parents picking up their children and the teachers overseeing them.

Kurogiri is waiting for him a block over. Izuku can't be late again.

Izuku jumps fifteen or so feet using Boost and grabs onto the handle of the window. He holds the lock and lets it crumble in his palm as he applies force, and he stuffs the metal pieces inside his other pocket. It might be useful later.

He managed to accidentally cut himself doing that, which is no surprise. Maybe he should've used his sleeve as a protective covering for his palms so the metal wouldn't go into him.

The night air is cool against his face when he drops to the ground after prying open the window. He lands easily on his feet and uses the tall bushes to hide him from the eyes of the people dining inside.

Izuku used to like listening to laughter. It made him feel lighter. Less heavy.

But as he listens to the boys' hyena-like laughter, the only thing he feels is anger. Their jeers and taunts are old news for him, and he's pretty much become used to them by now, but that doesn't mean it hurts any less than the first time.

He keeps his face carefully blank, his face shadowed from an overarching tree above. He wills himself to ignore them. When Kurogiri prepared him for school this morning, he told Izuku to ignore them. He specifically told Izuku not to resort to violence. He said to find some other way to escape them or get them to stop.

But Kuro doesn't understand, does he? He's barely human. Izuku doesn't know where his sudden bitterness comes from, but it consumes him all the same. Kuro doesn't see these things. Or maybe he does, and he just decides not to intervene. Despite that, he still thinks he can try and tell Izuku what to do even though he's not living it.

How can he tell Izuku to disobey All for One? That will only hurt both of them.

"Come on. He's asking for it this time."

"I wanna make him cry. He didn't cry yesterday."

"That'd be funny!"

There's four of them this time. They're bigger than Izuku, even though they're in the same grade, the same class. Everyone is bigger than Izuku nowadays.

It's not a hard feat.

Izuku stares at the sidewalk as he walks, already set on his destination. He's grateful Dragon Lady set it all up just in time. She's a lifesaver. Literally.

He didn't think he'd be using the warehouse setup so soon, but it's just as well.

When they slap him here, Izuku almost sighs. His back hits the harsh bark of the tree, and he stares somewhere far away. Out into the city. Their elementary school is on a hill, overlooking various buildings. It's beautiful.

If only the inside matched the exterior, Izuku thinks. Maybe he'd be feeling less bitter.

Izuku, as if on afterthought, lets his finger wander to his wristband. He hovers over the button, thinking hard. He doesn't want to turn off his location, as he doesn't know who may check on him suddenly, but he also doesn't want to alarm anyone.

So, Izuku compromises by silently shutting off his location and audio sharer and keeping his vitals on.

He hopes Yamada will forgive him for this one even though he doesn't deserve it.

It doesn't hurt. It never does. Most of their attacks are verbal, not physical.

Most bullies aren't physical nowadays. That's just in the movies. These days, bullies don't usually stuff you in toilets or steal your lunch money or trip you on the bus. Bullies are people who are close to you. They're nice to you in class and in front of teachers, and they smile and laugh with you when paired up for an assignment. But the moment no one else is around, the moment they can do what they want without punishment, the tides turn, just as they always do.

Izuku hates the beach. Maybe that's why he visits it so often with Kurogiri when he's allowed. It keeps him angry. Reminds him of who he is.

All Might changed the way he thought about the beach, even without knowing it. Izuku doesn't think he can ever tell him why. Maybe it wouldn't make sense to anyone else.

They seem to get bored of him quickly. Izuku stopped fighting a long time ago, and he barely makes any noise. Izuku thinks they're about to finish up their daily taunts and let him run to Kurogiri when, in a move quicker than Izuku can stop, the boy on the right uses his steam quirk to snatch something off of Izuku's backpack.

Izuku sees blue and yellow and red, and the earth tilts around him.

His All Might keychain. The one he hides from Father. The one Kurogiri gave him in secret the night of his first birthday at the facility.

Vision going gray with panic, Izuku reaches for it, lips parted. But he's shoved just as quickly and hits the tree again, chest tightening.

He lets out a shuddering breath, and even though it's not too cold out, Izuku shakes. "Hey," he says, voice scratchy and raw and panicky. "Give that back! Give it b—!"

The extended fist hits Izuku's cheek, and before he knows it, he's on the ground, dirt pluming up around him. The boy who hit him retracts his elongated arm, a product of his quirk, and laughs again.

They play catch with the keychain, dirtying it, squishing it, ruining it. The one thing Izuku counts on more than anything else these days.

Izuku stays on the ground, eyes burning. He wonders briefly what it would feel like to be the one on the other side. To be the one with the burning knuckles and the stupid, selfish grin on his face as victory sizzles inside him.

But then he thinks of All for One. He remembers his warning, his order,

and he remembers the comforting warmth of his father's rough palm when he wiped the dirt off his face.

And Izuku doesn't want to wonder anymore. He wants to find out.

The abandoned warehouse is cleaner than Izuku remembers it. Though, to be fair, he was drugged out of his mind when he first came here, so it's not like he'd remember it well.

Izuku comes in through the roof, scanning quickly for anyone who's tried to recently make this place their home. After ensuring he's the only one there, he walks the perimeter and checks all of the levels. His weapons and traps are placed exactly where he wants them to be.

Dragon Lady did perfectly.

He doesn't know exactly how it happens. One second, he's on the dirty ground, cheek already beginning to bruise, and the next he's standing over the boy who punched him, his body humming like a live wire as Boost surrounds him.

There's someone screaming. No, multiple people. It might be the other boys, but Izuku can't tell. He's just looking down at the one below him.

His face is covered in dark blood, and it leaks into the crevices of his eyes. He writhes, wailing and sobbing, and only causes the blood to spurt out of his nose at an even faster rate.

Oh. Izuku glances down and sees that his hand, now clenched in a fist, is covered in blood. Not his own blood, though.

His hand should hurt, but all Izuku feels is numb all over. He's disappointed. Is this what the bullies feel when they hit him? It doesn't feel as great as All for One said.

But maybe it's because Izuku didn't do it right. Maybe he waited too long. Maybe he should've done something more.

The other boys run away, yelling obscenities at Izuku and leaving their friend far, far behind even as he begs for them to wait up. He starts to scramble to his feet, but since he can't see due to the blood all over, the boy falls back to the ground and tries to crawl instead.

Was this worth it? Izuku can't be sure yet. He didn't even get his keychain back. He thinks he saw one of the other boys throw it somewhere in the field, so he'll have to search for it himself.

The more he stands, trying to make sense of what just happened, the more horrified he becomes. He can barely take in breaths.

As the air shifts, Izuku feels him. He looks up, and across the field, only twenty feet away, Kacchan stands, eerily still. His crimson eyes are blown wide, fixed on Izuku, and his lips are parted. The harsh winds blow his spiky hair into his face, and the first storm of the year finally makes landfall. As the droplets slide down Kacchan's face, Izuku feels the blood washing off his fists and shudders.

Color catches his eye, and Izuku sees his All Might keychain in Kacchan's clenched hand.

Izuku's heart jerks. He wants to ask for it back, to thank him, to cry, but the bile is rushing up his throat so fast now that Izuku doesn't dare open his mouth.

So he turns and runs until the smell of blood is lost in the rain.

The wind gets chillier as Izuku walks the perimeter. Checking a grove in the wall nearest to the back entrance, Izuku finds a tub of conducting paste along with a gun containing sharp, electrical rods. Smiling to himself, Izuku slings the gun over his shoulder and brings the conducting paste to the middle of the ground floor. He dumps it all over the concrete and spreads it around, creating a huge, hollow circle with it. He rubs the leftovers on the other floors just in case and then drops the gun off on a small overhang on the third floor.

He throws the broken pieces of metal he saved from the restaurant bathroom lock onto the pasted areas, making sure it's even.

Izuku then pours a flammable glue outside the first ring of conducting paste. He specifically asked for that from Dragon Lady, and she did not disappoint. She brought him the best kind the Club had.

With it all set up, Izuku does a final mental check on where everything is. He finds a spot on the third level that gives him a perfect view of the empty middle clearing of the warehouse and decides to stay there, barely breathing. All of the weapons and contraptions Izuku will use are spread out around all the levels. He can easily reach them all in seconds if he needs to with One for All.

But he hopes he can take a more organized approach this time around.

Izuku leans back, putting one shoe up against the wall with his arms

crossed. He's in the pitch black now. The only place in the warehouse that's well-lit by the moonlight is the clearing. It's a good thing rabbits are nocturnal, though. Izuku works best in the dark.

He closes his eyes and waits, mentally calculating the time he has left.

It's been just over ten minutes. Endeavor and Hawks have certainly realized he's left by now. The question is, who's going to find him first? Hawks is the only one who will guess this location, as he met him here before that night. But will he bring Endeavor with? Izuku doesn't think so.

He's smarter than that, surely.

The only thing Izuku is worried about is if Endeavor decided to call All Might and tell him. Izuku doesn't know if he even has his phone number, but he's still concerned.

Tonight, All Might is the only one who could be capable of ruining this. Him and one other hero, to be more exact.

The seconds tick down in Izuku's head. When he reaches ten, it's like a missile has arrived. One moment, there's nothing, and then the next, Hawks is just *there*.

Right on time.

Izuku's eyes open, and he watches as a winged shadow descends from above, entering through the large open gap on top of the building. Rocks and vines hang down from it, only adding to the abandoned look.

Hawks comes into vision when he glides gracefully to the floor, landing right in the middle of the circle Izuku made.

The boy pushes off the wall and uses a foot to press a wired button below him. Immediately, there's a hum in the air. An unpleasant buzz settles at the back of Izuku's mind, making his senses go wild, but he ignores it.

He walks to the edge of the railing, still in the shadows, and notes the way Hawks' wings twitch and shudder. The hero turns, eyes scanning all of the levels but to no avail.

Izuku's own senses are messed up due to the scrambler he turned on

that surrounds the perimeter, but that's alright. That's *more* than alright. Why? Because now Hawks' keen sight and hearing and fucked up too.

It's a great trade-off.

This allows Izuku to move freely through the shadows without being sensed. It's just as he planned.

Izuku begins to walk down the length of the level he's on, steps silent. He reaches the first weapon he laid out and picks it up, testing the draw of the metal bow.

"Gee, kid," Hawks calls from below. He's still turning around slowly, feathers rippling to try and sense better. "I figured you'd go here first. How long have you been planning this one?"

Izuku looks back, and all he sees is the red of those stupid wings. Izuku used to like the color red. But now he doesn't think he ever will.

He twists, aims, and lets the string go. The incendiary arrow goes flying through the air, near silent save for a slight whistle hidden by the hum of the sensory scrambler. Hawks sees it, but he doesn't move. He doesn't have to.

The arrow lands by Hawks' feet; Izuku hears its *plonk* clearly. For a second, nothing happens.

But then the arrow beeps and fire erupts from the cartridge at the base of it. Instantly, the shadows all melt away in the middle of the clearing as the fire extends around the flammable liquid and forms a ring of orange and red.

Hawks stands in the middle of it all, unfazed. His wings pull in a little to avoid the flames, but otherwise he remains calm.

Izuku puts down the bow and walks slowly to his next station, fingers twitching.

"That was a nice display," Hawks says, whistling. "But this isn't really the time for that, kiddo. I said I would watch you, and I can't lie—I'm afraid to see what ol' number one'll do if he finds out I let you run off. And *you…"* There's a rush of air, and Hawks hovers a little above the ring of fire, his large wings stretching out. "You are good at running, I'll give you that."

Izuku is *great* at running. But he likes to think he's just as good at fighting, too, though. He has experience in both areas. Maybe a little more than he'd like in the running department, but the point remains.

He simply watches Hawks for a moment, seeing how he responds to the environment around him. It's hard now for Izuku to get a sense of the man's current emotions, as the scrambler also works a little like a mental quirk suppressor, though not nearly as strong as a normal one.

As Izuku observes, Hawks remains calm and unbothered through the silence. His golden eyes dart to various corners of the facility, marking out the perimeter and undoubtedly noting all possible exits and entrances. Strapped to his side is a knife, and Izuku doesn't think he saw this on him at the restaurant. Meaning Hawks felt threatened at least somewhat and knew that Izuku had something planned.

Izuku takes his chance and hums aloud, still deep within the shadows. "Did you know I never actually chose my vigilante name? Not at the start." His voice echoes around the clearing, making it nearly impossible for Hawks to find exactly where it's coming from. "The public did after my first real debut. They said Rabbit just *fit* me." Picking up his next weapon, Izuku rests it on his shoulder with ease. "You want to know why?"

Hawks chuckles darkly; it's barely heard by Izuku. "I'm not one for lengthy anecdotes, kid, I'll be honest."

Izuku laughs with him. "Well, it's more of a demonstration."

There's no time for Hawks to reply before Izuku is hoisting the large gun up to hook on the railings and firing it. In a split second, a dozen kunais fly out and streak toward Hawks, attempting to tear through his wings. But the pro hero hardens them without second thought and brings them to his face to block his body. He drops back to the floor momentarily and kicks away the stray kunais following him like magnets.

Izuku fires another round before dropping the gun and sprinting to the next station, fighting to keep his red lightning from showing. He bounces off the wall to reach the next level, mind racing as adrenaline takes over.

Why hasn't he just flown around the levels and tried to find me that way? It would've been easy for him. Also, he doesn't have a problem being so close to the fire. He must've done something to his wings to protect them. Maybe he used a fire-proof glaze? His clothes might be slick with it, too.

That could be why he's moving a little more sluggishly. It would explain why he's not taking this seriously—well, besides the more obvious fact that he probably doesn't consider me to be worth that much effort.

Hawks came prepared. That much is obvious.

A barrage of tranq darts is next. Hawks shoots toward the ceiling to escape most of them, and his feathers shoot out on command to redirect the rest. Just as quickly as Izuku sent them out, the darts are now heading back toward him—giving away his position. Izuku curses and has to dart across the length of the warehouse to avoid the first wave. He weaves through the onslaught to find a more secure position and uses Pull to yank one of the feathers off course before it can return to Hawks. Izuku grabs it by the stem and grips it hard. This one is hardened, which is great for Izuku. It fits perfectly in his hand and is lightweight yet durable: the perfect sword.

He uses it to hit the next round of darts like a baseball. Most of them shatter on impact, spraying the liquid all over Izuku's body and suit, but the others go back to Hawks.

Izuku keeps the feather tight in his hand even though he can feel it trying to escape. He zips to the next trial, a cannon, and feels that wild excitement bubble up in his chest once more.

Despite the dangers, despite the threat of the consequences he'll surely have after this, despite the illogicity of it all, Izuku is stoked. Rarely has he been able to do this to someone so high-profile and so strong. He's never been able to conduct experiments like this!

Usually, Izuku could satisfy that craving of his to test things out by studying days worth of footage of his newest subject in battle. Take Edgeshot, for example. Izuku has watched thousands of hours of his villain fights, and he's filled out a whole book on his potential weaknesses, his strengths, his capabilities and default battle strategies and protocols—all of it!

But with someone like Hawks, who is so fast and elusive at times that he has barely any clear footage of his villain takedowns, Izuku hasn't been able to study him like he would anyone else.

So, being able to physically test his ideas out and watch things unfold right before his very eyes is something so childishly magical that it leaves Izuku breathless.

He's always liked to know things. He's always liked figuring out how

people's brains are wired.

Almost giddy, Izuku wrenches back the lever on the cannon and yanks the large trigger on the side. There's a *thwump,* and then a pearly white, silken net is unfurling midair and spiraling up at Hawks. The man dodges it, but only just barely. The edge of the webbing catches his boot and tugs him down a few feet, but it's just as quickly cut off by Hawks' knife.

Izuku presses a button on the cannon, and the net puffs up with weights and drops like an anchor to the floor. It cracks the concrete and feeds into the fire now extending higher and higher.

Izuku calls this one the fly swatter. Now, if only Hawks had been caught in it—he would've broken some bones for sure as long as his wings didn't break his fall.

Hawks stares at the net for a moment before throwing up a hand. "Hey, hey, now!" He says, teasing. "You didn't have to go all out for me with such a cool weapons demonstration! Is all this what that club of yours is trying to sell?"

Eye twitching, Izuku picks up a bolt blaster and doesn't think twice before letting loose over a hundred electrode bullets. His shoulder is starting to hurt from all the continued abuse of the guns' recoil, but he presses on.

Since the electrodes are so heavy, they don't make it very far. While Izuku aims at Hawks, the bullets actually fall lower and stick to the sides of the raised levels closest to the man. Only a few even go in Hawks' direction, and the man dodges them lazily in midair. They stick to the side of the walkways, and Izuku proceeds to run in another circle around Hawks using the connected levels, firing until there's nothing left in the bolt blaster.

When Izuku stops beside where he first started at the cannon, there's silence for a few seconds. Hawks' snort breaks it fairly quickly, though.

"Don't tell me you're going to—"

Izuku shoves the lever forward, and the electrodes thrum to life. Bright electricity shoots from their cartridges and connects with each other, forming not only a circular wire going around the edges of the levels but a *spider's web* as they shoot across the gaps to their partners. They even spark down to make home in the conducting paste Izuku

spread on the floor beforehand.

So now half of the flying space is taken by lightning while the floor has turned into a sea of shock, which doesn't leave much room for Hawks.

Come on. I know you want to come in the shadows with me. Come on, bitch. It'll be so much easier for me!

Izuku is confident he could overpower Hawks in close combat, mostly since he doesn't think the man will go so far as to knife him yet. Not after he admitted to being terrified of All Might!

But Hawks seems to have been ready for this dilemma. He must've predicted what Izuku was planning, as he only laughs loudly again and flies even higher above the web of electricity. He twists to float on his back as his wings flap slowly, and Izuku is so ecstatic that he can't even hear what the man says next.

This is just what Izuku wanted. He has one last thing he wants to try.

He leaves the bolt blaster and trades it for his nice, trusty firework launcher. This is the one he used to use all the time back when he wasn't even in UA. Dragon Lady hid this in a covered up, dusty corner, so it's a miracle Izuku spotted it while scoping out the place.

He sets it up on the railings and points it at Hawks, closing one of his eyes to better see the hero's position. He aims, calculates the seconds it'll take for Hawks to get into position, and then points directly up from him.

The firework shoots, and, God, Izuku just can't seem to *miss.* The bomb is heading toward its mark, and Izuku knows there's less than a second before it goes off, so he drops to his knees on the grating metal and prepares for it.

The beam that was holding up the slew of rocks and broken pillars near the gap in the ceiling explodes on impact, sending bits of concrete and fiery color everywhere. The group of rocks falls—as does the biggest one, weighing around five hundred pounds.

It drops through the air, and everything slows so much that Izuku anticipates the next beat of his own heart.

The rock flies toward Hawks, nearly a thousand pounds of force with the added help of gravity, and it would be so *perfect.*

The jagged rock would hit Hawks. It would crush him beneath the force and bring him to the floor alongside it. It would crush him completely. Every little bone in his stupid fucking wings would be crushed, and his skull would break apart if the rock hit the ground at the right angle.

And, according to what Izuku calculated, it should.

But Izuku isn't so malevolent to attempt any real murder on a pro hero, although he craves it dearly. He also doesn't believe he could one-up Hawks so easily.

So, Izuku isn't really surprised by what he witnesses next. In fact, he's barely even disappointed. He just wants to write it down in a notebook.

Hawks twists so he's upright, wings pushing him up and *toward* the hurtling rock so fast that Izuku has trouble tracking him. In his hands is a huge, sharpened blade he made from all the feathers he could spare, which Izuku thinks is just incredibly fast and impressive thinking.

The pro hero uses his wings to spin around and give himself the momentum he needs to slice right through the rock.

It splits in half cleanly down the middle, revealing a clear crystal center, and falls to the ground. A plume of dirt and debris follows in its wake, and as a result the raging fire is snuffed out immediately.

The only thing that's left of it is the telltale smell of burning wood.

Well. There goes that. Izuku thought his feathers could harden to that extent before, but it's nice to have it proven. It feels *good* to have it proven.

So his feathers really can go through rock and crystal itself. Maybe next time Izuku should try to see if they can do the same to steel.

When the dust cloud reaches Izuku's level, he sees his chance. His anger from before is back, spurring him on. He uses Pull to yank the metal staff he stored away earlier towards him, and he's pleased when a blade clicks out of one end and molds into a kind of sickle that shimmers white.

It's an advanced blade made by one of Izuku's old clients. He can tell it's them by the designs on it. *Just like the old days.*

More debris and slabs of rock fall from the crumbling ceiling, and Izuku jumps from the railings and lands on one of them as it falls. He uses them to bounce toward Hawks as fast as possible, who has his back turned towards him. Izuku holds his staff with one hand and Hawks' feather in his other. He releases it the moment he sees Hawks' wings ruffle, and he watches as the feather joins its siblings with ease.

The man's head turns just a fraction, allowing Izuku to see a sharp eye. When Hawks moves to counter the aerial attack, Izuku sees something flash in his hands.

A hidden weapon.

Fuck. Maybe he *would* try to kill him.

Izuku skips a breath and aborts. He leaps up and over Hawks just in time using his staff as a pole. The winged hero whips around and fires his own gun, surprising Izuku, as the boy didn't even realize he had one on him. A transparent shield flings out and closes around the space Izuku was in just a moment before.

Izuku's eyes widen as he falls back into the shadows on the other side of the level. *Looks like the one I made at school. Are you shitting me?*

He stays on the cold floor, thinking for a second. He pants a little even though this is not even close to being the most he's run in a fight. He was so close to being caught, so he should feel terrified, but he's just exhilarated right now!

Hawks dodges the rest of the falling debris and rights himself just as quickly. Each beat of his large wings has air pushing Izuku's curls back, cooling him off.

"Ya know, I've never had anyone try that with me before," Hawks admits, rolling his head until there's a loud *pop*. "Almost had me for a sec!" As he talks, a feather flies out of one of his wings and pierces through each one of the small scrambler cartridges spread around the warehouse, disrupting the frequency it's putting out. In just one second, that annoying buzz is gone, and all of Izuku's senses are back at full force.

Which means Hawks' are too.

The electrical probes follow right after, and soon the floor and air is safe again for Hawks to move around freely.

Izuku processes this too late, as Hawks' neck is then twisting around, almost resembling that of an owl. He stares exactly at where Izuku is hidden, his eyes glittering and sharp.

"Very nice," Hawks praises, but his words are extremely condescending. "I almost wish I hadn't told Endeavor to stay at the restaurant. He'd love to see this."

Oh, go fuck yourself.

Izuku grits his teeth hard and stands up, walking to the edge of the level and stepping off. He lands heavily on the floor, ignoring the pain that shoots up his bones. There's blood dripping down his cheek now, and he only briefly wonders when that happened. Hawks must've sliced him with a feather sometime during all of this.

Hawks lands, too, his red wings still outstretched. Izuku presses a tiny button on his wristband and enables the secret magnet he put there. The little pieces of his electrode probes all shoot toward him, and he catches them inside his suit pocket.

These things are expensive as hell, so he isn't going to waste them. He can afford to repair them but not to replace them entirely.

Izuku holds his new metal staff tightly, body tense as he faces Hawks directly. "Have you always been this spoiled?" Izuku asks, words laced with venom.

Hawks' face contorts into pleasant surprise. "Straight to the point, huh?"

"You think you can just flap around and insert yourself into things that have nothing to do with you? What, you think you're some kind of savior? A mediator or something?"

The pro hero isn't fazed in the slightest. He still has that stupid, shit-eating grin on his face. "Kid, I think you're just describing yourself."

Izuku shakes his head and steps forward to match him. "You think you can stroll into *my* Club like that and hurt a hundred members without consequence? Without so much as a slap on the wrist? Is that what you really think?"

"Is that what I think?" Hawks' voice drops suddenly, and his playful mask melts away like acid. "Well, if I'm being honest, I didn't think that at all. You should understand that I expected more of a fight. I

also expected more repercussions. I mean, I *did* kill that one nice fellow in the Good Doc's office, didn't I? Doesn't matter that he could drag himself back from the gates at the end of the day, because I still killed him, and that's gotta count for something." He scratches his head, the epitome of nonplussedness. "But if the only 'consequence' I get from doing that is *you?"* A shoulder goes up in a shrug. "I think I'll be alright."

The insult stabs Izuku through the chest and cracks open his ribcage, letting that fire from before swell even bigger with more room. He swallows a sea of insults and instead forces himself to remain as rational as possible.

"What do you want from me?"

"To be frank, I don't actually *want* anything from you." Hawks steps forward once more, not at all bothered by Izuku's staff pointed threateningly at him. "The Commission is who you're dealing with right now, not me. This isn't about me at all this time."

Izuku's skin prickles. He blinks, suddenly uneasy. "I find that hard to believe."

"What the Hero's Commission needs is your skill set. They want your influence, your power, your name—the whole shebang—on their side. They want you with us, kid."

There's a ping in Izuku's brain. He takes an involuntary step back at the hidden proposal, confidence slowly leaving him like a tire with a leak. "The Commission has hunted me from the very beginning. The only thing they'd want to use me for is an example. You think I'm stupid? They'll lock me up. Put me in chains." He steels his resolve. "Kinda like they did you, right?"

"Things have changed. I'm sure you remember Hosu." Hawks starts to walk around Izuku, throwing up his arms in weird gestures as he talks. It probably looks comforting or aimless to someone who doesn't know any better, but Izuku does. Hawks isn't just pacing, he's circling Izuku like prey.

Izuku is once again reminded of their power difference, and it's startling.

"Like I could forget," Izuku responds bitterly.

"Half the world thinks you're a murderer nowadays—and my sincerest

condolences for that; sounds pretty rough—while the other half are even more valiant in their support of you. You're back in the headlines, and you're stronger than ever. Once the evidence that you're innocent comes out, and I bet it will eventually, you'll be practically *worshiped."* His wings fluff up as he goes on. "And that's the kind of person the Commission needs right now more than anything."

Izuku can't tell if he's lying despite his efforts, and that frustrates him more than anything. With Hawks, you never know. It could all be true or it could all be fake, or maybe some of it has some truth in there with only a little bit of lies.

It's a tossup, and he doesn't know which he's willing to bet on.

He snorts, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. His suit is constricting him. He wants to rip it. "You're saying the Commission is willing to take in an underage vigilante like me—a criminal they've been fighting for years—just because they need the press?"

"Ah, ah, ah! Not just for the press. Like I said, they really do need *you*. They know your capabilities, Bun Bun. It'd be stupid for them to not try and get their hands on you."

"Bullshit. I don't think there's anything I can do that their little puppet agents like you can't. You think I'm that egotistical?"

Hawks' face darkens just a fraction. "Maybe I did lie a bit. I'm not here just to give you their sweet little invitation." He stops in his tracks and faces Izuku, making sure he won't break away from his gaze. "I know what you are, and I know what you pretend to be. I also know just how many heroes you've got wrapped around your little finger. You've built yourself quite the support system in so little time; I'm almost impressed. You managed to cheat your way into getting a handful of the greatest heroes to trust you enough to lie for you, to risk their careers for you." He continues his walking, now closing his circle a little more. "To *die* for you."

Izuku's blood runs cold.

"I mean, come on," Hawks drawls, staring up at the crumbling ceiling now. "You must know how much trouble they'd be in if, say, someone important were to find out exactly what they've been doing. Or, more appropriately, what they've been hiding."

With his fists clenched, Izuku forces out a tightly controlled breath. He

does another mental check to make sure there's no one else around the building before he continues. "If you're trying to blackmail me, this is a shit attempt at it."

"Nah, I wouldn't dream of blackmailing you, kiddo." He steps behind Izuku, and his presence sends chills down the boy's spine. Gloved hands rest on his shoulders, and Hawks speaks near Izuku's ear. "If I wanted to force you to do anything, I'd have other, much more effective ways to do that. But here? I'm just ensuring that you know exactly what will happen in the case that things do go south. I'm confident that's not necessary, though, right? I don't think you'd be that stupid! From what I've been seeing, you're pretty smart and chill."

Izuku only breathes when the touch finally leaves him. "So, what, you're going to sell me out if I ever step outta line? If I don't do what you want?" His voice quivers near the end, and he has to swallow hard to sound more put together. His instincts are telling him to hit his panic button, but he hesitates. He wants to wait a little longer. He doesn't know what Hawks will do if Izuku summons the heroes he was talking about here.

Maybe he'd decide to turn on them, too. It's far-fetched but not impossible.

"I'm not worth all of those pros," Izuku continues. "If you even try to reveal to the public what they've done, the backlash would be so harsh that you'd be wishing you didn't do it. The Commission wouldn't ever allow it, I bet."

If you sell out UA, you'd be selling out All Might, too, and that's just impossible. You'd never succeed at it.

Hawks isn't swayed. "Eh. They've done bolder things before. There's a lot of things they've done that not even your nosy little clients could sell you info on."

Eyes narrowing, Izuku hums darkly. "The HC can cover shit up, sure, but they're not fully invincible. And neither are you. If you do anything like what you described, you'll be done for. All of your credibility will be gone, and I'll *ruin* you."

"Ruin me?"

"How do you think the world will react once I give them all the information they're missing on you, *Takami?* Oh, sorry, you're not a

fan of your last name, are you?"

Hawks remains blank and expressionless, but the air between them is now static.

"You think they're ready to see you as you really are?" Izuku's blood is pumping so hard now that he can barely hear himself speak, but he pushes on before he loses the nerve. "What do you think will happen to poor little Keigo's dream when the public finds out who his father was? When I tell them all of what he used to do? What'll become of you when they figure out you lied?"

Fear makes Izuku reckless. He steps towards Hawks, chin raised, eyes locked in a challenge. He's so close to him that he could breathe and unsettle the piece of lint on the man's jacket.

"I wonder if those fans of yours would still love you the same if they knew how you clawed your way to the number three spot. You think the Commission will have any more use for you once your popularity has dropped? You think you can still hide your mother from everything you've—"

The nerve is finally struck. Hawks' hand is wrapping around Izuku's neck before the boy can even comprehend what's happening, but he can't say he's surprised.

Hawks forces Izuku back a few steps before stretching out his wings and taking off with the boy still held in his grip.

And, well, at this point in time, Izuku figures that maybe, just maybe, he bit off more than he could chew. His metabolism makes him eat more than the average person, that's for sure, but even this is just too much for him.

He chokes and claws at Hawks' forearm with his free hand as the wind whips at his face, but the man's grip on him is so tight that he can't do anything without the help of One for All. Red lightning spreads around his skin and lights up the space around them, and Hawks is moving so fast through the air that their combined forces make them look like a crimson star shooting upwards.

Izuku struggles to suck in breaths, and his vision goes fuzzy around the edges. He thrusts his staff towards Hawks' face, but a hardened feather shoots out and slices Izuku's knuckles, forcing him to let go of it before it even makes contact with the pro hero. The bōstaff falls out of his hand, and he can only just register how another few of Hawks'

feathers zip down to go after it, probably to stop it from accidentally landing somewhere it shouldn't.

But Izuku doesn't care about that right now. He can't breathe. He can't think. He can barely *see.*

They slow to a stop in the air with Hawks holding Izuku out easily in front of him. They're just below the clouds now, hundreds of feet above the dark city. Izuku jerks and twitches, trying desperately to intake air if only to stop the darkness from creeping up around him.

He tries to form words, to ask Hawks to let him explain himself, to give him another minute at least, *fuck,* because he was just matching his energy and God this is so fucking unfair, but then he sees Hawks bring a finger to his lips. He shushes Izuku quietly, slowly, terrifyingly, almost like one would a misbehaving child, and Izuku finds himself obeying. His jaw snaps shut, and he tries his best to hold onto consciousness. The pressure builds up in his head, and it *hurts.* It hurts a lot worse than Izuku remembers.

Or is it that he's gotten weaker?

Izuku can't do much of anything. He could break Hawks' arm. He could snap his wrist. He could break his face. He's within reach. Hell, Izuku could take his goddamn *quirk* if he wanted.

But in all of those situations, that would mean Izuku gets dropped. He wouldn't count on Hawks catching him, either. And in that last situation, if he did indeed steal his quirk, that would mean they *both* get to die.

What a sloppy way to go that would be.

Just when Izuku's head starts to become tingly again, a sensation he is well acquainted with by now, Hawks' grip on his throat lessens. He holds Izuku with just enough strength to keep him from falling or making any sudden movements while also allowing him to breathe.

Immediately, Izuku takes in a large gulp of air, coughs wracking his entire body. The pressure in his head depletes, and the pins and needles retreat for now, albeit slowly.

Izuku spends the next minute just trying to recuperate. He can already feel the bruises forming on his throat where Hawks' fingers dug into his skin, nearly crushing his trachea, and he gets the urge to just scream bloody murder out of frustration, because Hawks is really

making this difficult on Izuku now. How is he supposed to hide hand-shaped bruises on his neck from his teachers? Teachers who are incredibly attentive and who are also professional heroes?

Izuku's ass is *grass.*

Even if he could come up with some stupid, very inappropriate lie, they'd never believe him! He can only pray they'll heal fast. He'll have to see if he can borrow some turtlenecks from people in the meantime.

If he survives this one, he means. He hasn't calculated the new chance of survival yet.

"You," Izuku gasps, trembling all over, "are a bitch."

Hawks laughs, and it's metallic. Izuku hates to admit it, but he prefers the man when he's laughing condescendingly at him than when he's choking the living daylights out of him. "Well, you've gotta learn somehow. If you fuck around long enough you're gonna find out the consequences." He pulls Izuku closer to his face, wings flapping in such an uneven way that Izuku questions if the man is really as unaffected as he's trying to portray. "If you were anyone else, I would've dropped you at the bottom of the ocean by now."

"Am I— *hah* —supposed to thank you or somethin'?"

"No." His hand tightens again threateningly, but only for a few seconds. "You're supposed to shut up."

Izuku nods quickly, still trying to get back into the rhythm of breathing. "Yessir. You got it."

Hawks seems to accept this, as a few moments later he lets a few feathers catch hold of Izuku's clothing and lift him up a little to alleviate the pressure on his neck. He doesn't let go of him, though, much preferring to keep that control.

"I said I wasn't blackmailing you, and I wasn't lying. But what I *am* doing is saving your ass, kid." He shakes his head and scoffs. "You're involved with a lot of very important, very dangerous people, and that number has tripled after Hosu. People want you, Midoriya. Both heroes and villains. I know you know that, but I also know you don't care. You're not interested in that stuff, right? You've got that whole *lone rabbit* thing going for ya. Well, unfortunately for you, there isn't much of a choice here. Not anymore. The Commission is looking to

stake claim over you before someone else, someone much more unforgiving, will."

"I'm already with the Clu—"

"I said *shut it."* Hawks quickly shifts his hold so that Izuku is instead facing away from him, down towards the city. He's back to talking near Izuku's ear, sounding more impatient and frustrated than Izuku has ever heard him sound on video. "The Club isn't recognized by the public, and it's more of a united civilian group than any official villain organization. For that reason, it doesn't count. The Commission wants to offer you more protection, kid. They won't even make you reveal your identity right off the bat. You'd have time to make the necessary precautions."

No. Izuku won't delude himself into believing that any of that could be true. It's all politics. It's all stupid, childish shit. Izuku is great where he is. He doesn't need anyone, much less the fucking Hero's Public Safety Commission, to control him and monitor every little thing he does.

He's been through that before. He vowed to never go back.

Hawks' next words are directly in Izuku's ear. "And you can reveal anything you want about me. I'm expendable. If you think you'd be hurting the Commission by doing that, you'd be dead wrong. Don't be naive."

What makes you think I'd want to do it to hurt them?

"I get it. I really do. You're angry, but I know it can't be at me." Hawks clicks his tongue. "You can do better. You can *be* better. You're wasting your life running away when you could be saving millions. And that's pathetic compared to what I know you could be. Don't settle for anything less than what you deserve, *Rabbit."*

Izuku holds onto Hawks even tighter, hoping it'll bruise him too. "You tryna make a commission off me? Why're you trying so hard to convince me?" He wheezes and kicks a little with his foot, just to test how secure Hawks' feathers are.

"I think you'll find I'm a nicer businessman than some of my coworkers."

"Businessman? No." Izuku winces and coughs, neck straining. "Con artist, more like it."

Hawks whips him around again, but before he can say anything, Izuku's pocket buzzes. His phone lights up inside his jacket, and Izuku is *this* close to just asking Hawks to drop him anyway.

Seriously? A phone call? Right now?

Hawks grins something malicious, and he reaches inside Izuku's pocket quickly, ignoring the boy's exasperated plea of *come on, man.*

He holds up Izuku's very expensive phone so that they can both see it. The screen is lit up with nothing but a red balloon emoji as the caller ID. Honestly, it takes Izuku a second to remember who this is. He was pretty much high off of all his medications when he changed Aizawa's contact for the fifteenth time the other day. He's not sure how he settled on a lone red balloon, but oh well. It'll come to him later.

"That's inconspicuous for sure." Hawks hovers his pinky over the phone icon. "Wonder who this could be!"

"Press that and we're both dying tonight."

"I wasn't gonna talk at all, don't worry! I genuinely think it's a good habit to answer phone calls. It's probably important!"

"He can wait."

"He?" Hawks' brows raise. "Oh-ho! Another bout of teen angst, huh? You remind me of my rebellious phase. I miss it." He pauses suddenly, curling his lip. "Eh. Maybe I don't."

There's something sliding up Izuku's throat. It's warm, heavy, and cloying. The boy shakes even worse, his nerves twitching. His left arm is numb again, and it's confusing the receptors in his brain. The weight of the situation is finally catching up to him, and it's scary. He wonders what Hawks plans to do next, and he only prays that Aizawa decided to call him for some reason other than his whereabouts. He's not attempting to call again, so that must be good, right?

But why else would Aizawa call him? He *never* calls. Only Yamada does.

Izuku must have been too silent, as Hawks peers at him through concerned eyes after thankfully dropping his phone back inside the pocket. "You okay there, kid? Looking pale."

"Put me down."

“What’s the matter? I thought you liked heights.”

Izuku’s jaw clenches hard. “I like heights. I just don’t like you.”

Hawks pouts. “Aw. Guess I can’t blame you. Here we go!” He doesn’t give any other warning to Izuku before nose diving back to the earth. The wind is so loud that Izuku fights to not descend into another meltdown at the rising panic in his chest.

Izuku had his fun, but now he’s done with it all. He needs to get out of here. His adrenaline has gone and left him with nothing but the aching truth.

“What were you trying to do when you led me to that warehouse?” Hawks asks, and it’s only then that Izuku realizes they’ve already landed on the top of a big building some hundred feet above the city. “It was an ambitious setup, I’ll give you that.”

Izuku forces himself to stand, as he was previously sitting on his ass. His bōstaff is dropped beside his feet by a few whistling feathers, and he uses Pull to pick it up. “Was just testing some theories.”

Hawks’ gaze lingers on the boy’s palm. “Did you find the answers you were looking for?”

Flashing a dirty look, Izuku ignores the question and turns on his heel, scanning the nearby roofs to try and figure out where they are now. He figures All Might is probably done with his mission by now, so he might call him soon or be searching for him. Maybe he can make his way back to the restaurant and act like none of this ever happened. That would be ideal!

The question is if shit-for-brains over there will keep his mouth shut about this.

“I can’t exactly say this publicly,” Hawks starts, still standing by the edge of the roof and watching Izuku, “so I’ll say it here. Congratulations on being able to take Stain in. I heard all about it. I know the details.”

Stop, some small voice in Izuku’s mind says. Of course, it is ignored.

“You should be proud of yourself.”

Izuku walks to the other side of the roof. He thinks he’s only a few miles away from the restaurant. He recognizes this area. “I don’t need

your praise."

"It's not praise, kid. Where are you going?"

"Back where I'm supposed to be. None of this ever happened." Izuku flicks him off and steps up on a railing, preparing to jump onto the neighboring roof. "I was in the restaurant bathroom the whole time. The shit just wouldn't come out."

Hawks merely flies over to where Izuku jumped, landing in front of him and stopping him. "You should take this offer more seriously."

"I don't want your drugs. Now leave me alone." Izuku walks past him, picking up the pace.

"You're the one who waited for *me,* remember?"

"Doesn't ring a bell, no."

Hawks' call reaches Izuku just as he's about to jump for a nearby fire escape. "You know, if you accept this deal, you'll be pardoned of all your crimes."

For some reason, some stupid reason, Izuku pauses. He stares at the dark windows of the building before him, and he meets his eyes in the reflection. His bōstaff gleams in the light, and he finds his fist tightening around it.

Is Hawks being truthful? It's difficult to see if he's lying. Izuku senses no more malice coming from him, but he also doesn't sense any genuineness. It's like he's telling the truth but also not at the same time.

Izuku looks at the alleyway far below him. He wonders if he could make it into the open dumpster. "You can't promise that."

There's the rustle of paper, and Izuku looks back in time to see Hawks bringing out a pristine envelope. "Look at the contract for yourself."

"I'm a minor, so any contract I sign is void," Izuku states, but he stalks back towards Hawks to snatch it anyway.

"Nothing gets by you, does it? Sure, you'll have to have an adult sign with you to back you up—more specifically, a pro hero who's willing to take you on as a trainee, but the way I see it, that shouldn't be a problem. It looks like you've got plenty of willing heroes who'd do it."

He crosses his arms. “Anyone in the top ten would do you wonders, but, hey, what do I know?”

For a moment, Izuku lets himself think of a universe where he could just forget about all the lawful things and do his business without the threat of being captured. He thinks about how much better it would be. How much easier he’d be able to influence and help the ones who need it most.

His file wiped clean. It’s a dream Izuku never bothered entertaining for long, as he knew it would never be possible. But Hawks is here and saying that the Hero’s Commission would be willing to take Izuku on as an agent with no repercussions for his previous actions, so does that mean he could attain that dream?

Is that even possible, or is that just a manipulation tactic?

Why does Izuku care so much? He used to be deathly afraid of anything even related to the Commission, so what changed?

“You have a lot of remarkable skills.” Hawks glances up toward the sky. “You can do more for the world if you’re legal, and you could get the best training when you’re with us.”

“That’s why I’m at UA. What makes you think I need you at all?”

“You won’t make it through the three years UA requires to graduate as a pro. Face it, kid. You’ll be dead before you walk out of those gates.”

Izuku looks away from the large stack of papers in his hands. He isn’t sure what Hawks means by that, but he doesn’t like it. Mostly because he knows that he’s right.

He never planned on graduating. That thought is almost laughable, even now.

“You were always supposed to finish a little faster than the rest. There’s nothing wrong with that.” Hawks smiles, but this time Izuku likes to think it’s genuine. “Think about it. You’ve got time to make a decision. And when you do, well, you know where to find me.”

Taking this as a dismissal, Izuku turns on his heel to leave again, eyes burning.

“Oh, kiddo, one last thing.” Hawks’ head tips. “Do you know what ‘AFO’ means?”

Izuku shoves the contract inside his pocket. “No.”

“That sucks. Ya know, I just figured you would, considering it was the name of your file and all.”

Damn you, Doc.

“Ask your lovely commission,” Izuku offers, his contempt thinly hidden. “I bet they know.”

“You think so?”

Izuku doesn't respond. His breathing has picked up again, and he hopes Hawks hasn’t noticed. He can’t show his emotions here or else he might run the risk of telling him more than he should.

But then Hawks calls out to him again, his words sweet like honey. “Actually, maybe I’d get a better answer asking All Might. Seems like he’d know pretty much anything concerning you, am I right?”

And there it is. Izuku halts, brain short circuiting, and then he moves. He’s in front of Hawks before he even realizes it, his bōstaff pointed near his throat. “You’re not going to ask All Might anything,” he says. “Not that you’d get any answers worth your time if you did.”

“That look on your face tells me otherwise, *Bunny.”* Hawks pushes away the tip of the staff with a finger, his wings coming up to frame him as if to remind Izuku of the imbalance here.

Izuku wants to slice his wings off at the base and make sure they won’t ever be able to grow back. “You said I have some time to make a decision,” he hisses through gritted teeth. “So give me that time. There’s no reason for you to start asking my teachers *anything* about me. You’re straying too far out of your territory.”

“Huh. Consider this a little tip, kiddo: you can’t be claiming anything as your territory if you’re not able to defend it. So, quit trying to act like you control where I fly or what I ‘insert’ myself into. You’ll be much safer that way.”

It’s a stand-off. Izuku tries hard to keep calm, but the threat lingers in the air. AFO. Hawks said *AFO.* He obviously doesn’t know about All for One, but if he knows that ‘AFO’ has to do with Izuku, he’ll find out eventually. Izuku is certain he will. He has plenty of resources. And what will he do then? How much will Hawks see?

How much will he share?

And, most importantly, why the fuck does he seem so interested in all this? Is he saying all of this to blackmail Izuku? To covertly force him to say yes to what he's asking? To corner him?

The blade on the staff sways closer to Hawks' exposed skin. Sweat drips down Izuku's skin, and then something else follows. Warmth trails down from his nostrils, and Izuku blinks in mild surprise.

He feels the first thin stream of blood track down from the corner of his mouth, and his throat itches with the threat of another coughing fit.

Hawks tracks the blood with his eyes. "Overdue for a pill, I'd say. Better fix that before Endy gets suspicious."

Izuku jolts, but before he can do anything, the back of his skull throbs painfully. A *swooshing* sound erupts from somewhere to the side, and Extract buzzes inside his mind. Izuku's eye twitches in irritation when Endeavor touches down.

Just great.

The number two pro hero stalks toward them with his flames high, something dangerous on his stony expression. "What are you two doing?" He asks—well, demands.

"Heya, sir!" Izuku says cheerfully, turning around to greet him after wiping away the blood. "We were just having a chat! I was— *oof!"*

Endeavor crosses the distance between them in two quick strides, and then Izuku's world is tilting out from under him. The man grabs Izuku like a duffel bag and lifts him easily off the floor, snatching the staff out of Izuku's hand.

Which, first of all, rude, and second of all, Izuku is getting pretty tired of people carrying him.

"The hell is wrong with you?" Endeavor snaps, shaking Izuku. "Don't you listen, brat? I meant what I said back at the restaurant!" His expression turns to one of disgust. "And what exactly is going on here? You both smell like smoke and dirt!"

"Ya sure that's not just you, Endeavor?" Hawks teases with a wink.

Izuku sighs. “He beat me by one second.”

Hawks raises a hand. “Also, why didn’t you stay to finish dinner? I didn’t take too long, did I?”

“Nevermind! Just shut it!” Endeavor turns away from Hawks and raises a fist, allowing red-hot flames to shoot from his hand and into the sky, creating a beacon of light.

A signal, Izuku realizes, his stomach dropping. Fuck.

There could only be one other person he’s signaling.

His answer comes in the form of a rush of air. Extract only just barely catches up with the familiar quirk signature now heading their way. Izuku struggles to get out of Endeavor’s grip, his survival instincts kicking in, but it doesn’t matter, as All Might is *fast.*

No, no, no, this wasn’t the plan! Izuku is going to be cornered again. This is just embarrassing.

Izuku is dropped unceremoniously just as All Might lands with a wave of air on the roof beside them. Damn, that has to be record time. “Ow, *fuck!* Endeavor, that hurt!”

“Good!” The flame hero barks at him, wiping his hands on his suit as if to get rid of the dirty residue.

Izuku scrambles up, about to make a run for it, but a small red feather trips him. Before he can hit the ground, All Might appears right behind him and yanks him back up. He holds the back of his collar and shakes him in a similar manner to how Endeavor did.

“Are you alright, my boy? Are you hurt?” He doesn’t even give Izuku a chance to reply before whacking him upside the head. When Izuku makes a startled noise of protest, as it surprised him more than it did hurt, All Might only shakes him again. “You deserved that!”

Ain’t that the truth, Banjou says ruefully.

Shut up! When did I say you guys could talk again?

All Might sets Izuku down so he can wipe off the dust on his face. His eyes look over Izuku’s body for injuries, and thankfully he doesn’t seem to see the bruises on his neck. He only runs his fingers over the cuts on Izuku’s knuckles and cheek, brows pinched in worry. “Are you

crazy?" He asks, crouching down to better look at Izuku. He grips his shoulders in an almost painful hold. "I told you to stay—I *forbade* you from following me—and what did you do? You directly disobeyed me. *Again!* Do my orders mean nothing to you?"

"No, it's—it's not that, sensei, I swear!" Izuku struggles to find a good excuse, especially with both Hawks and Endeavor watching. "I—I was just—"

Endeavor scoffs. "I wouldn't say he tried to follow you. Looks to me like he was having his own fun with Hawks here. Just look at them, All Might."

All Might stiffens, and Izuku can just *see* the cogs turning in his head. This close to him, Izuku notices that he has a few scrapes on his cheekbones and on his suit, but otherwise he doesn't look harmed. Izuku guesses the last minute mission went successful for him, then.

Was that any sort of surprise? It probably ended quickly.

This tells Izuku that All Might must've gone back to the restaurant, expecting the dinner to still be in order. If Endeavor was still there, maybe that's when All Might was informed Izuku had disappeared. That explains why they seemed to be working together. But if that's the case, why didn't All Might just call Izuku?

"You… *fought* Hawks?" All Might ventures, and his voice is low. Much lower than Izuku remembers ever hearing from him before. It has his gut churning.

Izuku swallows, wanting to take a step back. "I—I wasn't—I—"

"If I may, Number One," Hawks interrupts, now standing close to the two of them with his hand still raised. "I caught the kid here pacing outside the restaurant shortly after you left. He was pretty worried about you, so I told him I could help him blow off some steam if he couldn't calm down." He makes an *oh well* gesture when All Might frowns at him. "I only suggested we do a little mock battle, and he agreed. We were just finishing up, actually. Took him for a flight."

Oh. That… that's sort of impressive. Hawks is quick at that, isn't he? Making up things. It's a short, simple lie that's mostly believable and easy to follow, and it would be almost *perfect* for the situation… if Hawks wanted to look like a shit liar.

Izuku slowly turns his head to stare at Hawks, wanting to ask him how

the hell he's gotten this far in life if that's his go-to kind of lie to explain shit like this.

Seriously? Izuku screams internally. *I'd rather you have not covered for me at all, dickhead! Now we look even more suspicious! There's no way they're gonna believe that. That's too nice for both of us!*

All Might looks between Izuku and Hawks, and Izuku stops breathing somewhere during that time. Maybe this is actually how Izuku dies. He just gets smited. He gets damned to hell. The floor opens up beneath him and swallows him whole.

Actually, that would be preferable.

"So you were endangering this stupid brat's life for the fun of it?" Endeavor asks, glaring at Hawks, who just shrugs again.

"Yeah, kinda. He needed it." Hawks faces All Might, and Izuku has to give him credit for not faltering under the blond's analytical gaze. "You can't blame him too much, Chief. Honestly, I was the one who __"

All Might lifts a large hand, unimpressed, and it's almost comical how fast Hawks shuts up. Izuku swallows back the words he was going to say as well, looking anywhere but at the man before him.

"I see." All Might stands and gives a squeeze to Izuku's shoulders, his expression giving nothing away. Izuku desperately searches for any kind of identifiable emotion within his teacher, wanting to figure out if he's believed the lie or not. "Thanks for watching him."

Heat washes over Izuku as Endeavor's flames burn brighter. The man looks positively disgusted by the display in front of him.

"Now that this is resolved, I'll be leaving." Endeavor stomps to the roof ledge. "I expect you'll keep your end of the promise, All Might. I won't be doing anything like this for you again. And next time, don't be foolish enough to bring your phone to a fight with a water villain. Perhaps then you could've fixed this yourself by just calling this idiot boy."

All Might is quick to direct a sincere bow to his coworker, one hand still on Izuku's shoulder. "Of course! And thanks again. Have a safe night."

Izuku has to close his mouth when it drops open in surprise.

Endeavor seems to only get angrier at the sight of All Might's bow. He grits his teeth, flames growing more wild, and just huffs in reply to the gratitude. In the next moment, he's shooting off the roof like a rocket, heading towards where Izuku knows is his house.

"Ah, I should be going too. I've got lots to do in the morning." Hawks waves a goodbye and gives a half-teasing salute at All Might. "See you around, Number One."

All Might straightens up, tone carefully neutral as he thanks him as well and wishes him a good night.

That's the first red flag. Izuku's nails dig into his palms, and he tries to stop himself from trembling even worse.

Hawks pauses to look at Izuku before he goes. "Oh, and don't forget about my offer, kid. My agency would love to have you once you hit the big leagues! I'm excited for when you make a decision."

And just like that, with a single powerful flap of those awful wings, Hawks is gone.

Leaving Izuku with bloody teeth, an annoyed teacher, and a crumpled contract.

Chapter End Notes

> have you left a seat for me? is that such a stretch of the imagination? hey little train, wait for me, i was held in chains but now im free
>
> also 😒 guess what the number for next chap is 😇 ive been waiting for this 😈
>
> i like this song on yt
>
> e

sapovnela

Chapter Notes

nice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keigo wishes it could've been anyone else.

He knows, deep down, that this is needed. He knows that he really has no other choice, the *world* has no other choice, but he still can't help but be a little upset.

He doesn't care about Midoriya Izuku. He really doesn't. He has no reason to care for him beyond the scope of him being a civilian that Keigo has to protect. Keigo is a pro hero, after all. That's sort of his job.

He cares—though maybe that's a strong word—for Midoriya the same as he does every other person out there.

To an extent.

But there is something about him, something Keigo hasn't figured out yet. He's been busy these past few months. He's had so much shit to do and assignments to complete that sometimes Keigo throws himself off buildings and waits a little longer than usual to let his wings unfurl just to feel something other than cloying dread.

It helps him forget certain things. His handler used to do the same thing. That's probably where he learned it.

The thing is that Midoriya has flown too close to the sun. He's burning up, and he's going to fall. The news says that this generation will be the one that gets to see the vigilante Rabbit rise up into his prime, but Keigo isn't so sure of that.

Sure, Midoriya certainly isn't at his best at the moment, as he's still young and has plenty of room to improve, but does he even have the *time* to grow?

Keigo wagers not. Maybe right here and now is Rabbit's prime only because he's not ever going to get a chance to show how much stronger he can be. He'll forever be stuck in time the way he is.

Despite this, Midoriya Izuku is still incredibly powerful. He has a few years of firsthand experience, and it's obvious he's been taught by the best, so he's skilled beyond his years. It makes sense why the Commission set their sights on him.

It makes sense why leaders from all sides of the world, both heroic and villainous, want him. They want him badly.

Hosu was the straw that broke the camel's back. Everything came tumbling down the moment the Nomu attacked, and the avalanche hasn't stopped yet. Far from it. Midoriya may be a little too preoccupied to see it (or he does see it and just doesn't care), but that doesn't change the fact that he's being hunted now.

In the past week alone, Keigo has come into contact with three people who came from out of the country and were sniffing around various villain organizations, all looking to get information about Japan's infamous bunny vigilante. Keigo knew they weren't planning to have a fiesta with the kid, so they had to be dealt with quickly, quietly, and discreetly.

He apprehended two of the three and had to kill the other. It wasn't the first, and he bets it won't be the last.

Is Rabbit his mission? No. He wasn't back then, when he first sprung around, and he's still not. Even now, with Keigo being tasked with merely passing along the invitation from the President of the Commission, he isn't supposed to involve himself with Rabbit more than he has to.

Which is all well and fun when you take into account the fact that Keigo still hasn't revealed to his bosses the full extent of what he knows. It's a damn wonderful thing that Keigo hasn't been assigned to Rabbit. If he becomes assigned, things get harder. Because then Keigo has to be making progress, and he'll have to reveal things.

He doesn't want to do that. And that scares him—that hesitance. If it's not because he cares about Midoriya, what is it? Why else would he be so invested in him?

Midoriya reminds him of himself, funnily enough, but Keigo isn't so soft to let that alter the way he thinks of the boy. If anything, maybe this is why Keigo is a little harsher on him.

Should he have left those bruises on Midoriya's neck when he carried him up into the sky? Probably not. Was the lesson worth it? Was it

earned? Yes.

Midoriya Izuku is just asking to be hurt with that mouth of his. He talks a lot of shit for someone who refuses to back it up half the time. It was surprising, at least to Keigo, that Midoriya didn't try harder while fighting him. It's obvious Midoriya was holding back for some reason—most likely because he didn't want to start something he wouldn't be able to finish. Keigo bets he's waiting for another time to really get his licks in.

He's meticulous like that.

As Keigo soars through the night, headed for the facility, he remembers that hard gleam to the boy's eye. He blinks and recalls the moment when he turned around and came face-to-face with that beautifully crafted curved blade of his.

He's never seen Rabbit with a sickle before, but somehow it seems fitting. There have obviously been a few major changes to Midoriya's life recently, so it's only logical that he'd have a new weapon to match.

Keigo knows that Rabbit is still very much in business. He's aware that the kid's brief absence in the public eye didn't mean anything. He's not so stupid.

The President of the Hero's Public Safety Commission obviously isn't so stupid to think otherwise either.

When Keigo arrives, she's finishing up a meeting on her large, holographic screen. He waits patiently just outside of her corridor and rests his eyes until he hears the sound of the recording finish.

"Hawks," she greets, her voice traveling around the bend to his ears. She never needs to see him to know he's there. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Keigo pushes off the wall and walks inside her grand office, hearing the familiar buzz of the invisible door turning on behind him once he enters. The security here never disappoints. "What can I say? I fly fast."

She rises from her seat and moves to stand in front of her desk. Her ash-blond hair is gelled back as it always is, putting more emphasis on her sharp jawline and cheekbones. Even when she has a touch of makeup on, Keigo can still notice the bags under her eyes.

“What’s your report?” She prompts, her focus shifting to a spot behind Keigo for a moment. With his feathers, Keigo feels for what she’s looking at on instinct and realizes she’s just watching someone walk past the floor-to-ceiling windows. Nowadays she’s always on guard. “I hear you attended All Might and Endeavor’s business meeting earlier.”

It’s not like she was implying she wanted Keigo to squeeze his way in there or anything just the day before, of course not.

Keigo hooks his thumbs inside his pockets. “Ah, I left early, but I can tell you that it was certainly something.” At Madame President’s neutral look in reply, Keigo continues, his back straightening. “In regards to cooperation, All Might remains the most enthusiastic force. He seems the most interested in this pairing and made continuous attempts to get Endeavor more comfortable with the idea of a unified front. It’s just as you predicted.”

“Has our Number Two been swayed then?” She sounds almost uncaring when she asks, but Keigo knows better.

“There were some tense moments, but ultimately Endeavor came to the conclusion that working with All Might directly was in society’s best interest.” Keigo tips his head forward. “And from what I overheard of their more personal conversations, they will be getting to work as soon as possible to help.”

Madame President lets a pleased breath escape through her teeth. She turns and begins to move holographic files around on her computer with a practiced hand, seeming much more relaxed. “Splendid.” Another flick of her wrist. Keigo keeps his eyes on the back of her head. “Now we can further our other objectives. Let’s ensure things continue to run smoothly, Hawks. This is the best luck we’ve had here in a long time.”

“It is,” Keigo agrees. He waits until she’s finished moving her files before continuing, keeping his tone bored and uninterested so as to not seem demanding. “Is this why you’re pushing for new agents?”

At this, the woman hums, not at all angered by the potentially invasive question. “Hero society has taken quite the blow recently. Spilled blood means new blood must be acquired. That’s the only way to assuage the people. Besides, it’ll keep those more unruly politicians and journalists quiet too.”

Keigo blinks, maintaining his still stance. “If I may, I’m not so confident that a fresh face is going to make the world forget what

happened."

"Of course it won't. But it'll make it all easier to swallow, yes?" She gestures to the windows on Keigo's right. The city shines brightly in the night, bustling with thousands of civilians with stories not yet finished or told. "That's all they ever really need. A beacon of light. A glimpse of hope. Now, heroes can't solve everything. I agree that we cannot simply throw more protectors at the civilians until they're satisfied—that may have worked before, but not now. We need something a little different this time around. Japan needs someone a bit more… sharp. Someone prudent." Her eyes find his. "Someone nearly exactly like you."

Keigo doesn't move or make a sound. He's heard those exact words before, back when he was still young and didn't know what he was getting into. Back when the only things he had going for him were red wings and a hunger to do good and have more than he ever did.

Madame President shakes her head. "Ignore me, Hawks. This is nothing I haven't rambled about before." She sits back down at her desk, putting a fist under her chin. "It's getting to be quite late. If I'm not mistaken, you have another reassignment early in the morning, so you should make preparations while you can. You did well tonight."

It's a dismissal if Keigo has ever heard one, but the pro hero waits just a few moments longer. He watches her, his brows furrowing just a bit.

Her expression morphs into one of mild curiosity once she notices him not leaving. She looks expectant now; she always knows when Keigo has something more to say.

"But that isn't all you came to report, is it?"

Keigo takes his hands from his pockets. "I came into contact with your first choice after I left dinner."

Her eyes glitter. "And here I was thinking Endeavor was the one who blackened those feathers of yours." Her amusement is short-lived. "I assume you gave him the proposal?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And?"

"As expected, he immediately became defensive. He didn't trust that

the contract was real, and he seemed to be under the impression I was tricking him to get him to reveal his identity or turn himself over." Keigo's wings twitch as the air shifts. Someone must have lowered the temperature in the wing over. "He was high strung. Skittish. I figure he's been busy."

"Did he attempt to run from you as he's done to our other agents?"

"He was fine with chatting, though he never let his guard down."

Madame President nods and proceeds to spin halfway in her chair, now looking up at the ceiling. "Naturally. That only proves we're right by doing this." Her eyes narrow. "So what is your overall conjecture?"

Keigo stares at his reflection in the polished tile below. "Based on past observation, the estimated chance of acceptance is seventy-eight percent."

"That's a rather promising number."

"It's an offer he can't refuse." Keigo sucks in a quiet breath. "I made sure of it."

She leans back. "Wonderful. When do you think he'll have his answer?"

"I promised I'd give him time to think it over, so I can't say for certain." Keigo half expects her to get annoyed by this, but she doesn't.

Madame President just nods again and does another slow spin. She only ever acts so calm around Keigo. She's been training him alongside his handlers for most of his life now, so she has no reason to treat him as just another agent. "That's perfectly fine. How long should he be given?"

Keigo starts. "You want me to decide?"

"You've done more personal research on him." She waves a hand at him. "I trust you know how much leniency he should expect from us."

Swallowing, Keigo forces himself to think. He knows Midoriya probably needs a good stretch of time to really think things through and weigh the costs versus the rewards. There's also the thing of letting his guardians know, which Keigo bets will just go over swell.

On the other hand, though, he can't give him too much time. That's just asking for unneeded trouble and stress.

Keigo calms his heart rate. "Three months at a maximum. That should allow him sufficient time to come to his senses."

He gauges her reactions, trying to see if that's asking for too much, but upon seeing no outward disapproval, he relaxes.

"Sure," she says easily. "We can spare that. And what do we do if three months pass and he's remained silent?"

It's a rhetorical question. She knows the answer, and Keigo does too, but he responds verbally anyway. He doesn't have to think about it this time, though this one hurts worse somehow.

She smiles when he tells her what she wants to hear, and Keigo doesn't think he can ever get used to that look.

Is joining the Commission the best thing for Midoriya? No. Is this what's best for Japan's improvement? Well, it's certainly a start.

Keigo hates that it has to be Rabbit. He hates that the Commission decided to turn their focus on some random, poor little bastard kid who has pretty much nothing else going for him. It's sick, it's familiar, and it's somehow necessary all the same.

And the worst part of it all is that he doesn't even know why it bothers him so much. He doesn't know why he's feeling so guilty. He doesn't know why he hesitated in pulling out the contract when facing Midoriya.

It was by the request of Madame President, yet it didn't make it any easier.

But Keigo knows this is how it must be. He just wishes—selfishly, tiredly, and bitterly—that it could've been anyone else. The current system of hero society needs both good and evil to maintain itself and function correctly. It needs people like Keigo, like his predecessor, like *Rabbit,* to make sure the scales are even.

This is simply how it is for the ones behind the curtains. Stage directors rarely ever get the recognition they deserve, but it's just as well.

Keigo spreads out his wings and bows lowly in farewell, remembering

Midoriya Izuku's spitting words to him as he does so.

This is okay, he reminds himself, memories of other people's blood soaking through his costume and caking onto his skin coming to the forefront of his mind. *This is necessary.*

And so Keigo obeys until he decides he shouldn't anymore.

The only thing worse than going to a bar on a Sunday night feeling upset is going to a bar on a Sunday night feeling upset with your certified therapist friend.

Shouta shakes his glass in tiny circles, watching the ice cubes swish around in his whiskey cocktail.

He's not usually one for these kinds of drinks, much preferring the fruitier and typically non-alcoholic tasting types. Tonight is an exception, though. There have been a lot of exceptions lately, but who is anyone to judge?

He stares down into his offending beverage, suddenly wishing he had stayed in bed with Hizashi instead of dragging himself here upon Inui's suggestion. It was nice being able to spend some quality time with his partner without any interruptions, so what made him think this would be better than sleeping with Hizashi tangled around him?

It's only ten, so really it isn't like Shouta is staying up past his normal schedule, as he doesn't get to sleep until two in the morning most nights anyway, but still.

He's getting a headache already.

"You're still upset he didn't answer your call?" Inui asks, a hint of amusement in his gruff tone. He downs the rest of his Margarita and works on his third. Being a mutant, Inui has a different metabolism than most. He can drink a lot without actually feeling the effects.

Which is weird considering that most dogs can't have even a little bit of alcohol without being poisoned.

Shouta huffs. "I don't care that he didn't answer. It's not like he has

to. ‘Sides, Yagi is supposed to be watching him, so I’m not worried about him at all.”

Inui twists in his stool to stare at him. “If you didn’t care, you wouldn’t be here.”

“I’m here because you offered to pay,” Shouta corrects in annoyance. Saying this, he asks the bartender for another drink—on Inui’s tab, of course.

His coworker rumbles in laughter. “You’re always very amusing when you drink. Your obliviousness is astounding.”

“Look, I don’t care. Seriously.” He rolls his eyes and tunes out the stupid song that starts to play in the karaoke area. “I was only mildly frustrated that he decided to ignore me. I know he’s not sleeping right now, and he’s always scrolling through his phone, so I know he saw it.”

Inui frowns at him. “Well, why did you call him in the first place?”

Shouta throws up an exasperated hand. “Mic didn’t tell me Midoriya was going over to Yagi’s for a couple nights until he was already packed up and gone. He didn’t even ask me.” He starts to tap his foot, remembering when he came home from patrol and noticed one member of the household missing. “I just wanted to check on him. See how he was doing.”

“And you waited until tonight to do that?”

“He was texting Mic all day and yesterday night, so it’s not like I didn’t know if he was fine or not. I just wanted to *hear* it from him.” His cheeks darken just a fraction. “You told me the other day I need to establish more… more comfortable communication with him. That’s what I was doing.” He scoffs. “Well, attempting.”

Inui turns back, thinking. “If Midoriya knew you were calling to just check on him, I am willing to bet he’d have answered. Perhaps he was worried he’d done something wrong.”

“I was just *calling* him—”

“And how many other times have you called him just to *call* and not lecture?”

Shouta thumps his head on the bar. His head is pounding. He wants to

ask for an ibuprofen, as he knows Inui always carries them, but doesn't. Inui would probably just remind him that he shouldn't take any ibuprofen while drinking.

"None," he admits, eyes closed.

"There it is, then. You shouldn't be surprised he didn't want to answer." Inui takes another gulp. "He might've just not wanted to deal with a lecture."

Shouta lifts up a shoulder. "Sure, but he could at least text me back. What if it *was* important? Like I said, he's answering Mic, just not me."

Inui holds out his hand. "Let me see."

Shouta hands over his phone and watches as Inui opens up his latest chat with Midoriya. He doesn't scroll up, probably to keep Midoriya and Shouta's other conversations private, and only reads the last few messages Shouta sent.

They're recent, being sent just an hour before, and he's still left on delivered.

called to ask if you needed anything. there's a meeting tomorrow morning at ua so yagi will have to bring you a little early

if you didn't remember to bring your uniform, there are extras at school so don't worry about it

Twenty minutes went by with no response, so Shouta texted again.

it's supposed to be cold so actually wear a jacket this time pls

Another ten minutes.

and it's Sunday so take your meds

When Inui finishes reading, he gives Shouta a judgmental look.

Shouta sits up and crosses his arms tightly across his chest. "What?"

"If I were Midoriya, I wouldn't answer you either." He merely shrugs at Shouta's annoyed glare. "You started off fine, but then you screwed it up with that last one."

"I was just trying to remind him, Inui. How is that bad?"

“Well, I assume Midoriya doesn’t like taking his meds—not that any pup does—so having you text him just to remind him was probably frustrating. Also because I’m certain that’s not something he could *forget.* From what I’ve heard, he has quite the memory. He probably felt that instead of making sure he wouldn’t forget, you were making sure he wouldn’t skip them. Which, if we are to put ourselves in his shoes, probably told him that you didn’t trust him enough to take them himself.”

Shouta stares blankly. “Because I don’t trust him to take them. He fights me whenever *I* tell him to take them; he only listens to Mic. Now he's with Yagi, and there’s no telling if that oaf will be able to convince him or not.”

“If he knows you don’t trust him, it’s no wonder he might become defensive and reluctant to answer.”

Seriously? Shouta picks up his glass. “How else am I supposed to talk about that kind of stuff then?”

Inui shakes his head. “I’m not saying you were wrong for texting what you did. I’m only providing an explanation for why Midoriya might be ignoring you. As I said, in *his* shoes, I would do the same.” The hero pushes lightly on Shouta’s arm. “You two are going to butt heads a lot. That’s only natural; you’re the adult and he’s the pup. There are always going to be things that he won’t like but that he’ll have to deal with, and that’s alright. There will be things *you’ll* have to deal with too.”

Shouta snorts. “Ain’t that the truth.”

No sooner have the words left his mouth than the bartender walks up to Shouta and slides a tray of loaded nachos in front of him.

The man raises a brow in confusion. “Thanks, but I don’t think we ordered th—”

“It’s from that table right over there, actually,” the bartender interrupts, a ghost of a smile on her face. “They think you’re cute.”

She points behind him, and both Shouta and Inui follow her finger.

On the other side of the bar sits a group of five or so women, all with some kind of large alcoholic drink in their hands. They’re giggling and laughing loudly, and they all blush when they see Shouta looking at them. Two of them nervously wave, only to break off and push around

their friends in embarrassment.

It's obvious they're all shitfaced, or at least on the way there.

"Jesus," he mutters, turning back around with his ears reddening. Sometimes Shouta wishes he could actually wear his wedding ring instead of keeping it on a hidden chain around on his neck.

"Maybe you should've brought Yamada," Inui says in amusement, seeming to enjoy his coworker's predicament.

"Absolutely not. They'd hit on him too."

Inui barks out a laugh. "For sure. The two of you would be eaten up by all the women here."

Shouta's nose wrinkles in disgust. While he's messed around with women before, back when he was fresh out of high school, he can't really say he enjoyed it all that much. It's just not really his thing.

That was more of Hizashi's forte.

Besides, the idea of being with anyone else but Hizashi makes his stomach churn. His partner has truly ruined him for anyone else.

Shouta pushes the nachos towards Inui as an invitation. He knows the man is always hungry.

When Inui starts to dig in, Shouta continues their previous conversation after downing the rest of his drink. "I just don't know what to do with him anymore." He swipes a hand down his face. "It's like everything I say goes through one ear and right out the other. He never *listens.* He's just incapable of it! Like he's—he's never been taught *how* to listen."

Inui makes a negative noise. "No, the pup knows how. He just doesn't understand *why* he should listen. You haven't exactly given him a reason to."

Shouta groans again. "I've been trying. What more can I do that won't just piss him off further?"

"You can shut up more often, for starters."

Shouta throws him an unimpressed look. "Really?"

"I'm serious. You explained to me on the phone the other night that it

seems as soon as you take one step forward with him, you immediately take two steps back no matter what. And that tells me that you talk way more than you should." He shifts in his stool and taps his furry temple. "Act, don't yak. The more you blather and nag him, the less influence you have."

"Yeah, I'm seeing that."

"Midoriya does not have trouble processing information or hearing you. He hears you just fine, I'm sure. The issue lies within your inability to keep his attention. So, stop thinking that one more sentence will be enough to tip the scales in favor of obedience, because it won't be." His ear twitches. "I hear how you talk to him in the teacher's lounge. Every day, you tell him the same things, and every day, he disobeys and goes against your wishes simply to make you angry. You know that, and so does everyone else. Except instead of trying to correct *your* failures, you try to correct his in response."

Shouta picks at the nachos, reeling back his irritation. "Okay," he says, voice tight. "What exactly should I do instead?"

Inui turns his whole focus on Shouta, his dark eyes serious and piercing. He must've been thinking about this for a while. "I understand you're trying to be more lenient with him. You keep punishments to a minimum and instead just keep telling him what he's doing wrong. But for a pup like Midoriya, as far as I can tell, at least, that's not going to work. Ever. You keep thinking that if you say it one more time, maybe he'll listen. So, on the twentieth time, there you are with your fingers crossed behind your back as you tell him not to put thumbtacks on Kan's chair again."

At the mention of Midoriya's latest scheme, Shouta can't help but smirk. He does enjoy some of Midoriya's pranks against Kan, though he can't say this aloud.

"If you want him to take what you say seriously, say it once," Inui advises, "and then back it up. With children like Midoriya, you have to get their attention. One of the easiest ways to do it—and also an affectionate way—is to touch them. I want you to put your hand on his shoulder, or his arm, or even his head! When you talk to him, I want you to look him in the eye and, without any sort of snide remark or expression, keep it short and sweet. Tell him plainly what you want done, and make sure it's clear what you're trying to say. You must indicate whether what you're saying is positive feedback or approval or whatever else. Are you showing recognition? Are you praising him?

Make it obvious so he won't be left guessing." Inui signals for another round of drinks and continues on smoothly. "Don't stretch it out or be unsure of yourself. That, I believe, is what causes Midoriya to push you away and even flat out ignore you at times."

Shouta stares into his empty glass, mulling over the words. "Like that night I tried to talk to him. He kicked me out."

Literally.

"Yes, precisely." Inui pokes his chest. "Going forward, you need to touch, *then* talk. It will create a physical connection between the two of you and allow for an emotional one to be more easily formed. It will also ground him and ensure that you are heard."

"Sometimes he doesn't like to be touched," Shouta counters.

"I understand. That's why I'm not saying you should hug him or anything of that sort, as that would be far too much. It would overwhelm him. I'm talking about small gestures. But, if you can't touch him, try giving him something to hold onto instead. A stress ball, maybe, or a fidget toy. Perhaps even your car keys! Well, maybe not that… but just give him *anything* to focus on while you talk. Touch would be preferable, however." Inui digs into his pocket and pulls out a kneadable ball. "I have trouble focusing too sometimes. This little thing here helps me. I keep it inside my pocket while I speak to people and squeeze it whenever I feel like I can't focus. I would recommend keeping one inside of yours, too, and then whenever you wish to get Midoriya's attention for something important, hand it to him. The trade off counts as a touch, you see."

For the next few minutes, Shouta thinks about different ways he could achieve this. It sounds easy, but Shouta just knows he'd find a way to screw it up.

He needs to start small, right? Maybe the next time Shouta has to tell him something not so important or personal to him, he could try this method. But what should he do first? A hand on the head? Shouta has done that before, so it shouldn't be too jarring. What about a punch to the shoulder?

Is that too weird? Too *not-Shouta?*

Ugh. Shouta wishes there were classes available for teachers of illegal vigilantes. So much could go wrong, so there's a lot that Shouta has to be careful with.

“Okay, so what happens if he laughs in my face when I do it?” Shouta asks, resting an elbow on the table. “What if he responds badly? I want to make sure I can do damage control.”

Inui only gives him a small smile. “Why don’t you try it once first before worrying about that? I think it will go better than you think.”

Shouta huffs. “I’m not so sure.”

“Your lack of confidence doesn’t do you any favors with him, you know.”

“It was my confidence that got me in this mess in the first place,” Shouta mutters, deciding to put his head back down on the table. “I thought I was handling him fine. I thought *he* was fine. But then everything exploded again at the hospital and I know it was mostly my fault, I know that, but I just never thought he was holding all of that in him and…” He ends in a groan and a lame gesture with his hand. “God, I’m old.”

Inui doesn’t deny it. “Well, you are only thirty-one having to take care of a pup nearly half your age. Most have way more experience than you at this stage of guardianship.”

For some reason, this annoys Shouta. “I’m barely even his guardian, Inui. Nezu is, and yet that rat doesn’t bother to help us with him. He just sits back and encourages all of his illegal escapades. Do you know how difficult it is to keep weapons of mass destruction out of our house when Midoriya always says *but Nezu said it was okay!* I’m gonna strangle him. All he ever provides is a credit card number, and we don't even need that half the time.”

It’s not like Midoriya has an issue with using Nezu’s platinum card, though. Shouta would find it amusing if not for his extreme frustration with his boss.

“Anyway,” he finishes, shaking himself. The alcohol is what’s making him so talkative, he thinks. He’s never usually this honest.

Or maybe it’s also because Inui is just genuinely a good person to talk to.

“You said you weren’t initially told that Midoriya was going to Yagi’s for a sleepover, right?” Inui begins, smoothly changing the topic. “If Yamada had asked for your input, would you have agreed to let him go?”

Shouta blinks quizzically. “I wouldn’t have liked it, but I would’ve said yes since Mic was going to allow it.”

“That tells me you’re still nervous about it, then. Are you hesitant because of Yagi or because of something else?”

“I don’t know. I trust Yagi’s abilities, of course—I’d be stupid not to—but I guess I’m not a fan of the idea of Midoriya going somewhere where I won’t be able to watch him.” He hums deeply. “You know how much trouble he can get into in such a short amount of time. He’s pretty well-behaved with Yagi, but you never know.”

“But you don’t have a problem with the actual sleepover?”

Shouta runs a hand through his choppy hair. “What do you mean?”

“If this sleepover happened at a later date, maybe at a time where things were less, eh, *tense,* do you think you would be less worried?”

Frowning, Shouta thinks this over. Would he have a problem with it? He is a bit of a control freak when it comes to situations as precarious as this one, and he doesn’t want to risk anything happening to Midoriya when he’s not around, so of course he’s going to be hesitant about sleepovers. But if it’s in the future? Maybe when he won’t have to worry about that?

“It’ll be good for him to get out of the house once in a while. It might help him destress or something.” Shouta scratches his chin, thinking to himself that he likes the next song that plays on the speakers. “So, no, I don’t think I’d be as worried. If he’s with Yagi, at least, I know he’ll be safe.”

Inui smiles to himself, something satisfied in his expression. He picks up his drink and studies it. “A change in setting once in a while is good for a pup’s growth, too. I’d say the sleepover is overall a good idea. Perhaps Midoriya was needing it.”

Shouta doesn’t answer, instead snatching back his basket of nachos. He eats some quickly, distracting himself from the way his skin starts to burn from the alcohol.

He bets Midoriya did need the break.

Maybe he’ll be happier when he comes to school tomorrow. Maybe things will therefore be easier for Shouta. He can talk to the kid more if he’s not as defensive and thus change how they interact with each

other.

This can be good—for everyone involved.

Shouta just wishes the kid would text him back sometimes.

It turns out that All Might's phone is waterlogged.

Fighting a water-based villain with your phone in your pocket isn't the smartest idea, as Endeavor had quickly pointed out before leaving.

Izuku would probably tease Yagi for making such a stupid mistake if it were any other time. He'd probably poke fun and ask him why he doesn't just buy a water-resistant phone or at least a water-proof case, as he certainly has the money to do so.

But now is not that time.

It's only when Hawks has flown out of sight and his quirk has long since left Izuku's sensory range that All Might turns to look at him.

He's still in his big form, and his skin is letting off more steam with each passing second. It makes him look bigger than he already is, and it showcases the cold blue glint to his eyes clearly.

It's scary.

Knowing by now that none of the adults in his life particularly appreciate being kept waiting, Izuku opens his mouth first. "Yagi, I know you—"

"Not right now," the man interrupts, his voice hard. He holds out his hand. "Can I use your phone for a moment, please?"

Izuku is taken aback, but he doesn't need Yagi to ask again. He digs in his pocket and hands his teacher his phone, feeling suddenly very small under his gaze. The man dials someone's number—one of his agents, Izuku thinks—and begins to give a report to them on the villain fight he ended just ten minutes before.

While he talks, Yagi steers Izuku with a large hand to the edge of the

building. He then wraps an arm around his middle before smoothly jumping down to the floor far down below with Izuku in his hold.

Izuku has to bite on his tongue hard to hide his squeal, as that was still a *really* fucking long drop. All Might's knees and calves must be made of damn steel!

The boy wonders briefly if he'll ever be able to reach that level of invincibility one day.

Yagi lets Izuku go but keeps his hand on the boy's shoulder. They wait at the sidewalk with Yagi still on the phone and Izuku kicking pebbles awkwardly off the curb, and after a couple of minutes, the hero's car turns the corner and makes its way towards them slowly.

Izuku inwardly gapes. *Self-driving? Why didn't I notice before?*

He probably should have expected that, to be honest. He does have a Batmobile car.

Yagi points to the passenger's seat, and Izuku dutifully gets in without a word. The man goes to the driver's side and buckles his seatbelt with one hand. Immediately after doing so, the car pulls away from the curb and continues on its way. The screen in the center of the dash says they'll arrive at All Might's apartment in less than ten minutes.

Which is still too long for Izuku, mostly because he doesn't know what Yagi is going to say to him once he's off the phone. He seems to be going in depth about the battle and the plans he will make in the future regarding that specific area he was fighting the villain in, so it's taking a while for him. He also mentions sending the paperwork directly to one of his managers to send to him.

All the while, Izuku rotates from staring at his lap, staring outside the window to his right, and staring out the windshield to watch how close Yagi's car stops from the other cars in front of it at red lights.

He bounces his leg up and down, gripping the fabric of his pants out of nerves. He anxiously looks at Yagi every minute out of the corner of his eye, but the blond isn't looking at him at all yet. He's still on the phone.

Izuku wants to ask if he can see the man's phone to check if it's salvageable, honestly just to calm his anxiety, but he doesn't. He doesn't want to interrupt him. Especially not while he's on such an important call.

Izuku also wants to ask why he's still in his big form, as the windows of the car should be tinted enough to allow All Might the chance to deflate for a while, but he figures that question wouldn't be well appreciated. Besides, he bets All Might just likes to remain in his hero form while on the phone with other authorities.

So Izuku sits in the passenger's seat, quiet and uncomfortable. He feels sore from his sudden flight with Hawks, and the scrapes on his hands and cheeks itch terribly. He raises a hand to scratch them, only to stop midway and force his hand back down.

He stops bouncing his knee and instead picks at the dirt and debris on his suit. He hopes Yagi isn't upset about that too.

It *was* a pretty expensive suit.

Izuku tries to distract himself by thinking of the contract Hawks offered him. He closes his eyes and remembers the words he skimmed over—the promises the Commission made.

He thinks about what he would be offered if he accepted, and he also thinks of all the things he could do.

Back there, in front of Hawks, Izuku wasn't ever going to show he was considering it. But here? With Hawks gone?

Maybe, *just* maybe, Izuku wants to read it over again.

When the car pulls into the parking lot of All Might's building, Izuku can't take the tense atmosphere anymore.

He's unbuckled and out of his seat before the car has even fully parked. Yagi yanks the phone away from his ear and calls out to Izuku in alarm, but the boy is already running to the lobby with red sparks biting at his ankles. His eyes are burning for some reason now, and his gut is tied up in knots. This feels like that moment before you throw up. When you get that feeling in your stomach and in your throat and you know it's coming but you can't do anything to stop it, so you're just in that brief period of dreadful *waiting*.

He fears that if he's in All Might's presence for even another second he might just crumble.

Izuku knows he screwed up—he knew it was bad before he even did it—but he didn't actually think about how it would feel to disobey *All Might*. He forgot, for just a moment, that this wasn't Aizawa or anyone

else.

He should've had a better plan. Maybe then Yagi wouldn't have had to deal with this.

Izuku only just remembers to flash his ID card at the receptionist before making his way inside the open elevator. The elevator knows exactly where he's headed, so Izuku doesn't need to do anything but wait for it to move.

The doors close just as Yagi makes his way into the lobby looking panicked and flushed, with smoke billowing off of him now that he's in his small form again.

Izuku's back hits the elevator wall, and he covers his face with his hands. God, he's making a mistake by doing this. He's going to make Yagi even more mad. But he's already in a hole twenty feet deep, so what's a few more inches? He may as well go all out.

The wall facing the outside of the building shimmers into transparency, but this time Izuku is too nauseous to look down at the city below.

When the doors finally open up on All Might's floor, Izuku rushes for the stairs, only to immediately jump out of his skin with a shriek.

Shimura Nana stands in front of him, her large white cape billowing from behind her. The weird thing is, she actually isn't standing there. It's a mere ghostly version of her, as she's too transparent and glittery to ever be real. Izuku isn't even able to feel her quirk.

He shudders and shakes his head, fixing himself, and when his eyes open, she's gone, but he can still envision her displeased expression and crossed arms. She looked just like All Might did when he jumped up onto that rooftop and locked eyes with Izuku.

It would be funny if both of those looks weren't directed at Izuku.

"What, are y'all going fully sentient now?" He hisses, stalking right through where her ghost stood and only just remembering to kick his dress shoes off near the entrance.

If we have enough energy to feed off of, we can be seen by other users, even for only a glimpse, Shimura tells him, and she sounds just as angry as she looked. *How do you think Toshi saw me when he was at his lowest, kid?*

“I kinda thought he was just losing it.”

You’d be just like him, then, she bites back. *Whatever you’re doing, quit it, kid. Go talk to him, Midoriya Izuku, or so help me…*

Izuku ignores her and makes his way to the guest room in record time. He snatches up his overnight bag and throws his belongings inside it. Taking only ten seconds, Izuku changes out of that god awful suit and puts on a pair of sweats and a compression shirt. He stumbles back down the stairs while yanking a hoodie over himself, his bag hanging on his back.

He needs to go. Yagi certainly won’t want him to stay for the night again—not after the trouble Izuku caused tonight. He’ll have to go back to Yamada’s, and since he doesn’t have his phone now, he’ll just have to show up unannounced on their doorstep and hope they won’t mind.

He doesn’t have anywhere else to go unless he decides to risk it and go to one of the last remaining safe houses he shares with Dragon Lady. That or Kacchan’s place.

Though that option probably wouldn’t be very good. He’d just get the Bakugous involved where they shouldn’t be.

Kid, that’s a stupid plan, Banjou points out. He’s not going to kick you out, for fuck’s sake. He’d just go after you anyway if he did.

“Shut *up!”* Izuku says hotly, skin burning as he makes his way back to the elevator. “Get out of my head! You’re all so ann—”

The words die in his throat when the doors open up just as he reaches out a hand to summon the lift. Yagi walks quickly forward, making Izuku stumble backwards in response. The boy feels really stupid at the fact that he didn’t realize the man would be up first before he would be able to take the elevator back down.

Izuku really is off his game tonight.

Well. There’s only two ways for him to leave now, and seeing as Izuku isn’t exactly in the mood to have to ram his way through the absolute Goliath that is All Might, his route is pretty clear.

The balcony in his room should provide a good place to jump off from.

The thought hasn't even fully crossed his mind yet before a plume of smoke washes over the living area and makes Izuku cough. Suddenly, large hands reach through the white to grab him, and Izuku swears his heart skips a beat. His audacity leaves him in one fell swoop once he registers the fact that All Might is definitely prepared and willing to fight him over this.

Izuku is held a foot above the ground, and he struggles in Yagi's grasp, trying his hardest to dislodge his grip. His bag drops to the floor beside him, muffled by the carpet.

"Are you out of your mind, Young Midoriya?" Yagi asks, his words thunderous. "What on earth do you think you're doing? And just *where* are you going right now!"

Izuku writhes around, trying to find a foothold. "Let go, All Might!"

"No, I am not letting you go! I want an explanation, and a good one at that." All Might lowers him down to try and get a better look at him. *"Now."*

"Well, you're not getting one now!" Izuku snaps back, scrabbling at the floor with his socks.

Fuck Yagi's big form. This isn't fair in the slightest!

All Might shakes his head disbelievingly. "Why are you being so difficult tonight? Did something upset you? Is that why you ran off and attacked Hawks?"

Izuku grits his teeth. "I didn't attack him. I only threatened him! Endeavor is so—hnng— *dramatic!"* Izuku attempts to kick at All Might's knee, but he's only held out further away from the man to prevent it. "You shouldn't be in this form, Yagi! You're going to hurt yourself using it for so—"

"Dammit, kid, quit struggling and *look at me!"* All Might commands, shaking him a little until Izuku looks him in the eye. "Do you understand what Endeavor could do to you just from witnessing what he did tonight? Do you know what Hawks could do?"

His sharp words cut into Izuku's skin, and they leave a terrible, terrible taste in his mouth, but the boy doesn't listen. "No!"

"No, you don't understand?"

Izuku tries to pry off the man's hands from his arms. *"No!"*

"No, *what?"*

Izuku struggles profusely, his chest stuttering with each rapid breath. "No, it's—I—it doesn't matter!"

"How doesn't that matter, my boy?" Another shake, and All Might is bending over to be eye level with Izuku. "You're playing with your life and freedom, young man! Don't you see that?"

Let go of me, please. Fuck, let go.

Izuku is tired, ashamed, and overall *scared.* Not of Yagi, not ever of Yagi, but of the situation. He's scared of the contract he stuffed inside his hoodie pocket. He's terrified of what might happen to him—no, to the world—next.

His lip is trembling, and he hates it. He doesn't like to be near anyone when he's like this. Not even Kacchan!

"I'm not playing with anything!" Izuku argues, trying and failing to steel his voice. "You just—you don't understand!"

"Then help me understand!" All Might says, sincere and desperate and exhausted.

Izuku can only jerk his head from side to side. "No!"

"Young Midoriya!"

The tone nearly gets to Izuku. The boy struggles even more profusely and calls on more of One for All on instinct, managing to turn his back on All Might so he can try to tear himself away. He wants to *leave.* "All Might, it's *none of your business* what I did or why I did it! So do yourself a favor and just—just stop so I can leave you the fuck *alone!"*

The outburst leaves Izuku more breathless than he expected, and after just a moment more, he stops his struggling. He hangs there for a second, allowing Yagi to hold him up by the back of his clothing. He's leaning forward, and when he goes limp, he slips out of his hoodie with surprising ease and lands face first on the fluffy carpet with a weirdly moist thump. He stays there, content in just becoming one with the expensive rug.

Maybe All Might will take pity and leave him alone if he becomes his

rug.

There's a good ten seconds of silence that follows. Shock and confusion permeates through the air, all coming from Yagi, and Izuku burns silently in embarrassment. He's ashamed by his outburst and also for stressing his teacher out. This surely isn't what Yagi signed up for when he agreed to let Izuku stay over.

Izuku took advantage of that kindness, didn't he? Ugh. Here he is burning another bridge for no reason.

Izuku rests a freckled arm over his face and squeezes his eyes shut. His insides twitch and coil up even more, making him feel like just one big fuckup. He tries to pull himself together, as throwing a pity party has never really been his thing, but it's hard. His self-loathing has made another appearance, battling with his drive to do good and be better, and it's difficult to see what the outcome will be. The winner is a tossup every time.

It's always random.

Yagi sighs, and then there's movement. Izuku feels him sitting down beside him, and a cool breeze washes over the boy when All Might deflates again. His large hand rests lightly on Izuku's arm, and Izuku doesn't even have the energy to fully react to the touch. "What am I going to do with you?" Yagi whispers, more to himself than anything, and Izuku wants to shrivel up and *die*.

He gets the strong urge to apologize, but he doesn't think it'd be well received. He doesn't deserve to make it seem like he's trying to get Yagi to pity him either.

Rain starts to pitter-patter against the windows all around the living area, and thunder sends flashes of light through the floors. Figures that it'd be raining now, right? Izuku hates irony.

He buries his face more into the carpet, clutching the thick, individual strands of fabric with his fingers.

"I hate Hawks," he says eventually as a way of explaining, his voice muffled and hoarse.

"What?" Yagi asks. He pokes at Izuku's temple until the boy moves his face away from the rug, though Izuku still doesn't meet his eyes.

He repeats his statement, and Yagi laughs humorlessly. The sound of it

has Izuku wincing visibly.

“I gathered that.” Yagi withdraws his hand and rests it on his lap. “Why do you hate him?”

“He’s… he’s just a prick.”

“And him being a prick was enough reason for you to go attack him?”

Izuku huffs softly, his face flushing. “No.”

“So, what really happened that made you want to have a go at him?” Yagi’s brows furrow. “I know you have more self-restraint than most, so this can’t just be a spur of the moment sort of thing.”

Izuku can’t answer immediately. He chews on his inner cheek, wondering if he should just admit fault to it all and have Yagi forget about everything or if he should tell the truth and accept whatever reaction comes.

It shouldn’t be such a hard decision, but it is.

“Yagi, he…” His voice gives out, and he coughs. Panic shoots through when something wet runs up his throat, but he’s relieved when he recognizes that it’s not blood, only saliva and something else.

“Yes?” Yagi prompts, and he still sounds so non-threatening when he says it. Izuku doesn’t think he deserves that kind of tone. He thought Yagi would continue to talk to him roughly. The change is confusing.

“He…” Izuku stares at the carpet even more, counting the different colors he can see. “Hawks hurt my friends,” he settles on.

This garners Yagi’s full attention if Izuku didn’t have it already.

All Might straightens up, a little surprised breath whistling between his teeth. “Your friends? As in, your classmates? Young Bakugou?”

Thunder rumbles near them, and the windows rattle for just half a second. Izuku feels the vibration deep in his bones.

“No. I’m talking about, uh, the Club.” At Yagi’s semi-confused look, Izuku sits up awkwardly, still evading his mentor’s gaze. He gathers himself and then slowly, while fiddling with his hands, tells All Might all about what happened the other night. He tells him about the phone call, and he reveals to him how *angry* he was after receiving it.

Izuku rushes through most of it, and for the most part, Yagi is a quiet and attentive listener. His expression is set in a permanent frown, and he keeps his emotions carefully contained. He's good at not passing judgment immediately, Izuku thinks.

When Izuku casually mentions Hawks knowing his connection to Rabbit now, All Might coughs so hard that crimson specks come up.

Damn. That could be me. Well, it is me sometimes.

Izuku grimaces at the sight of his mentor's coughing fit. "Bloodborne pathogens," he mutters without thinking.

He wonders if ingesting more of All Might's DNA will help his growing illness. Er, probably not. It would probably do the exact opposite, but who knows? That's why Izuku wants to find out.

Izuku finishes off lamely by recounting what happened that night he was drugged and caught by Hawks, which was the motion that started this all, technically.

All Might puts his hands on his knees, and his knuckles turn white with how hard he grips his pants. He seems to be processing the new and stressful information rather quickly. "My boy, why didn't you tell me this earlier? I never would've let you near Hawks if I had known what he'd done. And you should've let me know, Midoriya, the very *second* Hawks joined us tonight, that you wanted to go. I would've made up an excuse for us to leave. Why didn't you? Did you not feel like you could?"

"It's not that, it's just…" Izuku hesitates, realizing how stupid this sounds all of a sudden. "It would've been obvious that I was just running away. Besides," he says in a lower tone, lifting up a shoulder in a jerky shrug, "I wanted you to finish your dinner with Endeavor, sir. It looked like things were actually going well, and I know that that never happens so… so I didn't want to ruin that."

Yagi sighs again and runs a hand through his hair, which is frizzing up now that the gel he put in it has been washed off. "I appreciate you caring about that, but that's not your job. My first priority is your health and well-being, and it's obvious that being there at that dinner wasn't helping you at all. You matter more to me than the business that was happening, young man. I should've seen that you needed help. Ah, I knew I shouldn't have left you there with them. I apologize." Izuku's neck snaps to the side to correct him, to tell him that he has no reason to apologize, but the man is continuing before

he can get the chance. “So, if you weren’t ‘attacking’ Hawks, what was really happening?”

Great! That’s the very question Izuku was hoping to avoid. He looks off to the side, trying to appear as innocent and nonchalant as possible. “It was really nothing, All Might. We… were just talking.”

Yagi is not convinced. His lips morph into a displeased, thin line. “You’re bleeding, and you have soot all over your face and hair.” He reaches forward and yanks up Izuku’s wrist, holding his palm up to the light so he can inspect it. “And you have calluses on your hands that weren’t there before. You *were* fighting, but over what? And why did he indulge you?” His eyes narrow. “You sought him out, didn’t you?”

Cornered, Izuku resigns to his fate. He knew Yagi wasn’t stupid. He doesn’t know why he thought he could evade this line of questioning.

“Yes, I did.” His skin prickles at Yagi’s calculating stare. He elects to ignore it for now. “I—I was just angry. He was saying all of this dumb stuff during dinner, and I didn’t know if he was going to reveal anything or—or do something to me, or if he was gonna let Endeavor in on it all so he could finally arrest me. I… he made me upset. And after what he did to the members of the Club, I guess I wanted to make sure he knew he couldn’t just do that and get away with it, y’know? I wanted to take him down a notch.”

“So, you wanted to take revenge? Specifically by leading him into a trap?”

Embarrassed at having his plan said so plainly and childishly, Izuku only nods.

“Okay.” Yagi tips his head. “Do you realize how immature that sounds?

Izuku bites his bottom lip and nods again. It sounded a lot better in his head at the time, he wants to defend, but he doesn’t bother.

He figures that taking full responsibility for his stupidity is the only way to go now. Is this what Yamada meant when he told Izuku to be a little more mature in those instances where it matters the most? Izuku hopes so.

Yagi closes his eyes and mutters something Izuku isn’t meant to hear. He swipes a hand down his face in exasperation, and the first bit of

disappointment leaks into the air.

Izuku would've preferred being shot in the abdomen than having to feel that coming from his teacher. It hurts him in ways he's never felt before, and that's saying something.

When the silence becomes too much for him to handle, Izuku speaks, his words choppy and small. "You said you thought you killed All for One back then, didn't you?"

All Might stares in shock, mouth gaping open for at least five seconds. "Er, forgive me, my boy, I'm not exactly sure what this has to do with __"

Izuku cuts him off, albeit apologetically. His mind is running in circles, and if he doesn't voice this gnawing thought of his, Izuku fears he may implode. "If you could go back in time to when you were younger, and you had the opportunity to get even stronger, have more resources, and have more support… to—to finish off All for One before he could do any more bad… Would you do it?"

Silence.

When Izuku drags his gaze up to meet Yagi's, he sees some myriad of dark horrors etched onto the lines in his face. Shadows extend over him, and his brows are angled upwards in deep thought.

"If I had the chance to do it all over again?" Yagi asks, just to confirm.

Izuku swallows back Yagi's feelings of longing and regret, hoping he's not making some sort of mistake. "Yeah."

"Well, I…" Yagi pauses. His eyes are focused on something not even Izuku can see. "I suppose I would. It would save a lot of people grief, I'm sure. It would… save thousands."

Izuku takes in this answer, letting his brain unwrap each word like a gift to fully memorize them. He thinks he likes All Might's answer. It's almost comforting. *If the universe had only granted you more time with One for All back then, sir, I reckon you would've killed my father the first time around, maybe alongside your master and Gran. Maybe Shimura would've been able to live a longer life. Maybe she'd still be here, in this room, and wouldn't be just a ghost that appears in your most anxious hours. I wouldn't have been born, and that's okay, because Mom would be alright.*

The wind begins to roar outside, and Izuku casts a tired look at his discarded bag a few feet away.

But you didn't have the luxury of time, and I don't either. You didn't have the powers, the support, the experience you needed when you were only fifteen. There was no way you could've done it as you were. But… if you were in my shoes, if you had the same skill sets and powers and knowledge about All for One that I have, you would've killed him already. You would've already achieved more than I have now, I know. Much, much more.

All Might never would've wasted his time running away. He's better than Izuku could ever hope to be.

And maybe that's why Izuku is considering this.

"My boy," Yagi prompts, and it's only then that Izuku realizes he's been trying to get his attention. "What's this about?"

Izuku's chest tightens, and he again sees her. Shimura is hovering over All Might's shoulder, a mere wisp of air, and when thunder breaks for the third time around them, she's gone once more.

With his blood pounding loudly in his ears, Izuku takes out the crumpled contract and hands it over.

Chapter End Notes

villains don't need consent forms

also the song harleys in hawai'i by katy p really reminds me of vig shindeku for some reason lmfao. boutta make a whole new au just for them istg. id love to make this fic shindeku but unfortunately that relationship would just be so toxic with the way izuku is and it would be very shortlived ☠️☠️ it'd be fun as hell tho. what a power couple.

w

void whispers

Chapter Notes

> nat try not to shove a flashback or ofa dream into every chapter challenge: impossible edition

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a saying Izuku remembers reading in a book back when he was younger.

He couldn't have been more than seven or eight. When Father was bedridden at the laboratory for his treatments, Izuku was always a little more daring than usual. One week, he snuck inside his father's quarters and stole a little book from him.

Izuku can't recall what it was called, mostly because Kuro caught him and took it away before he could get too far into it, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that the root of a good portion of his deepest, most personal fears stems from one sentence from it.

If you are raised with an angry man in your house, there will always be an angry man in your house. You will find him even when he is not there.

Izuku—for all his years of trying to work past the cards he's been dealt, for all his efforts of trying to prove that he's a better person than his father, that he's *good* —will always have this cardinal fear inside him. It's small; a little seed compared to some of the more common fears he has. But it's the most terror-filled one all the same.

The nightmares that are the most scary, Izuku finds, are the ones where he looks up at All for One and sees his own face staring back down. In those middle of the night moments, the moments where sometimes he wakes up and can't tell what time it is or where he is or even what he is, he *forgets.*

Sometimes there's a hero by his feet, and it's not All for One standing over them with bloodied hands, no.

It's always Izuku.

Izuku used to like to read in his spare time. He especially liked the psychology books he managed to find in the library. They helped him understand certain things.

He knows that for the most part, children will imitate aggressive behaviors displayed by models in their life. It's only natural. He also knows that children tend to imitate parents of the same sex. It's innate. It's just how it is, for the most part.

Which is probably why, although some part of Izuku always knew his father had to be bad—mostly because *Izuku* was bad, he always looked up to All for One. More than he did Inko at the beginning.

It's something he feels guilty for even now.

So this knowledge that he'll always hold a part of All for One inside him, beyond just shared DNA, scares him. Because he can only remember certain parts of his young life with his mother, but he can remember everything from All for One.

If All for One was the bad man in the house growing up, Izuku will be that bad man too.

Because children end up associating that anger and violence when they're young with a balanced, normal household. It'll become familiar to them. Natural. And so they'll search for that anger in all the love they come across. If the child doesn't carry that anger inside them, well, they'll gravitate to the ones who do.

And if there isn't a bad man in the house anymore when they're older, they'll just invite them in. Even without realizing.

This fear is all consuming. And if Izuku doesn't shape up, if he doesn't work faster, he worries he'll become just like the bad man who made him first think that love means the same as hate.

"What is this?"

Izuku drags his gaze up. Yagi is staring down at the contract with furrowed brows, confusion lacing his tone. His eyes go quickly across the paper, working his way down, and Izuku hugs his knees tightly against his chest as he turns away.

"Hawks gave it to me on behalf of the Hero's Commission," he says simply.

At this, Yagi's lips part. He glances up at Izuku in alarm. "They gave it to *you* or Rabbit?"

Izuku shrugs. "Rabbit. But I don't think Hawks told them about my

identity yet. Only he knows. At least, that's the impression I got from reading it." He rolls his eyes a little. "That's one good thing, I guess."

Yagi reaches past Izuku to grab a pair of reading glasses off the ottoman. He continues looking at the paper, which is front and back. It doesn't hold all the information on it, but it's not supposed to. It's not technically a true contract, but it's the gist of what the next one Izuku receives will look like, probably.

This is just an overview.

"Instead of sending Hawks to capture you, they sent him to talk?" Yagi says to himself. "This doesn't make sense."

"Hawks said they need me. My, uh, influence. Said it'll help the country after everything that's happened."

Yagi shakes his head. "There has to be another reason. You're a criminal—no offense, my boy." He continues after Izuku's quiet *'s okay.* "Their only goal should be to strike you down. Well, you *have* done a lot for the safety of the public, and the younger generation no doubt looks up to you and relies on you, but now that the media is calling you, er…"

He trails off awkwardly, but Izuku finishes for him without a beat. "A murderer."

"Yes. That." Yagi puts the paper down in his lap. "The Commission hasn't said anything in your defense, not that we would expect them to. Until evidence comes out that proves your innocence, if that will ever come, there's no feasible reason for why they'd try to publicly recruit you. This document here is saying you'll be a part of their reformation program, and you'll be working on the field with pros immediately for training. Do they think the media would accept that?"

Izuku doesn't have a response to that, as he's not even sure himself. He's been trying to stay away from the web, but it's hard to watch the news or use the Internet without seeing an article about his vigilante persona coming up. Half the world is rallying to defend him while the other half is fighting for more effort to bring him in.

Rabbit has gained supporters since Hosu, but he's also lost some.

It's impossible to tell which side the Commission is leaning towards, if they even care at all. They'll probably use this as an excuse to try and get Rabbit to flock to them for safety. It could be some sort of trap,

despite Hawks' genuineness.

"This says you wouldn't have to reveal your identity to the world until after you've become a full fledged pro," Yagi remarks, eyes widening. "You'd only be required to work with a handful of pros before then, so your identity would be secure until you're of age."

Izuku hums negatively. "I don't think that's legal. Like you said, I'm a criminal. They don't have to protect anything. Even if they honored that, someone would tell. Something would slip through the cracks, and I'd be done for." He picks at his skin. "I've made some enemies since I first started. If the world knew me, the villains would go after the school again. Every UA student would be at risk."

"That's something we'd have to be prepared for then. We should request more information from them and see just how far they're willing to go to protect you. You're a child, so they still have to respect your privacy if your guardian wishes it so. You're a kid first before you're a vigilante."

Would the Commission really do that? Take in a masked criminal as their newest hero-in-training and keep his name a secret? Just to, what, get the rope around Izuku's neck?

He won't lie and say that the idea of working with high-ranking agents like Hawks and others isn't appetizing. Rabbit is technically a Club representative, so if he agrees to work under the Commission as well, would that unify the two groups officially?

God, what would the Club think about all this? The Board will lose their minds.

Would this be in their best interest? Would the Commission allow Izuku to continue his work at the Club too?

They should, right? Hawks dabbles in illegal crime organizations all the time, and he's still a public hero. There's no reason why Izuku shouldn't be given time to do his own personal things as well.

"What do you think about it?" Yagi asks him, his words quiet.

Izuku startles. "Huh?"

"I'm asking what your opinion on this… *invitation* is."

Surprised, Izuku doesn't answer immediately. He honestly didn't think

he'd get a choice in this. He didn't think he'd even be heard! In regards to stuff like this, Aizawa and Yamada have always told him to just leave it to them to solve. He gets told, despite it literally being about him, that he shouldn't worry about it. He rarely gets to listen in or say his side or opinion.

But here, Yagi is looking at him with open ears and a patient stature. It's like he really wants to hear what Izuku has to say.

This sparks a newfound flame within Izuku, and the boy straightens up.

"I… I mean I know that Hawks can't be trusted—like, to an extent, at least. I know the Commission could just be wanting to trap me, because I've done some, er, pretty bad things before, and I… I'd deserve everything they'd give me, honestly. But." He wipes his face and leans against the ottoman more. "For some reason, I just think that this… this could be *different."*

"Different?" Yagi repeats. "How so?"

"I don't know. But it's just…" Izuku shrugs. "This could be a good opportunity for me."

Yagi seems to think over his student's response. "From what I understand, just reading this as I am, the Commission would grant you full immunity to any charges regarding your past vigilantism and other criminal activity. They would put you in their new program and issue you a training license, as I mentioned. I'd wager that, under their guidance, you could become a pro in just a year or two."

"Yeah! That's what I'm thinking too." Izuku scoots forward. "And not only that! They—they'd help me! The whole Commission, including all their sub branches! I'd get access to their resources, their supplies, their aids for missions, their info! I…" He pauses, shutting his eyes tightly to give himself a moment. "For the first time, I could have backup. If something goes wrong during a fight or something, I won't just have to… to just hope, you know? I'd have support."

"Is that not what UA provides for you already?" Yagi isn't angry when he asks, far from it. If anything, he sounds curious. Maybe a little sad. Izuku can't exactly tell, as there's adrenaline racing through him now. It's a funny feeling, being listened to.

Izuku starts to rock on his feet. "I love UA, All Might. I really do. It… it's given me something to strive for. But I just—I don't think it'll be

enough for me."

"Why not? Do you want more specialized training? Is everything right now just too boring? Too remedial?" Yagi flashes a half smile, somewhat sheepish. His cheeks tinge pink. "I know I've been sort of busy as of late, so I've been slacking when it comes to personal training, but I will definitely be attempting to help out more, both outside of class and in class. I need to work with you to see what you need to be a better hero."

Geez. How does Izuku tell All Might his true feelings on this topic without making him feel bad? The last thing Izuku wants to do is make the man feel like he's not good enough, because that's not the case here at all.

All Might continues on just as quickly, though. "I know I've grown weaker, and my time limit does make things hard. I do apologize for that limitation, my boy. I fear I'm not quite the best teacher for—"

"No!" Izuku interrupts loudly before he can rethink it. He coughs into his palm. "No. You're great, Yagi! I mean, you're—you're *you!"* He shakes his head rapidly. "I—I love training with you! But it's—I *know* you're busy! All Might, you're the *number one hero.* Of course you're going to have a lot to do. The people need you. The world does! Now more than ever. You need to focus on—on other things. Besides me. I… I can't take you away from that anymore than I already have."

"You're my successor, Young Midoriya. And more than that, you're *my* student. I promised to provide you with anything you need. I need—no, *want* you to succeed."

Izuku averts his gaze to the side, a little embarrassed now. The warm words settle over his skin like a blanket, and it feels nice, but he just can't let himself enjoy it. "I like to think I'm doing okay so far, sir. You being there has helped greatly. I appreciate your teaching, and I want to continue it whenever you have the time! But, Yagi, I just can't continue to ask you to do all of this for me when the rest of the world needs you too." The rain pounds harder against the windows. "After the USJ, with that Nomu, you knew All for One was back, didn't you? If—if Tsukauchi wasn't sure then, he knows now. The data he received from all the Nomu during Hosu is proof enough." Izuku rubs his neck. "I need to get stronger even faster. I need—I need to be *better.* Do more."

"You do enough just by existing as you are, my boy. Rabbit's name

itself is enough to inspire thousands now! It's incredible!"

A small smile slips onto Izuku's face, but he shakes his head again anyway despite that weird, satisfied feeling creeping up on him. "I want to be able to help you, All Might. When the time comes, I mean. To… to stop it all. To kill him."

"All for One?" At Izuku's nod, Yagi immediately throws up his hands, choking on air. "No, I cannot ask you to—"

"When you gave me One for All, your problems became mine, too. And that's okay! I—I knew that from the very beginning!"

Yagi is adamant. "Absolutely not! I am not going to allow you to—"

"But even then, All for One isn't just *our* problem, sir. It's a world thing! So we need to take him down, right? Before he gets even more powerful!"

"You are not nearly strong enough to face him, young man," All Might warns severely, and Izuku agrees.

"I know." *Believe me, I know.* "That's why I'm saying that *this,"* Izuku gestures to the paper in Yagi's lap, "can help me become stronger in the shortest amount of time. It's probably the only opportunity I'll have to be able to have that kind of training and experience. I… we don't have the time to spare to just wait for me to slowly get better, sensei."

Yagi seems to hold his tongue upon registering the title. He's hesitant about something, but what?

Izuku stares at Yagi, watching sorrow and guiltpass through his blue eyes like little rafts in the roaring sea.

The boy tries to give him a reassuring grin, hating the fact that his teacher is sad right now. "And in order to do that, in order to get stronger, I have to get more experience. I have to grow faster and—and be more hands on. And I can't do that by just being Rabbit anymore! I… I can't spend my life running." Izuku holds up a hand, his crooked fingers shining with callouses and bruises. "Even if I wait long enough to graduate UA, I don't want to leave Rabbit behind. I want to take him, and m— *mold* him. Into a hero that the people will love. To give people hope that if they just work at something hard enough, if they put the effort in, they can get where they want to be. I don't want to disappoint half the world by casting Rabbit aside."

There's a beat of silence, and All Might sounds so unlike himself now that it makes Izuku hang on to every word just to memorize the difference. "And you think that partnering with the Commission will help you achieve this goal?"

Izuku doesn't hesitate. "Right now, I can't see any other possible way. I'm running out of time, sir. I just don't want this to turn out like… like…"

Shimura's name forms around his mouth, but he keeps it shut at the last minute.

Yagi seems to understand, however. He always does. The man stares down at his lap, looking troubled.

Izuku swallows, not liking the silence. "All Might?"

His teacher waves him off. "I'm alright. I understand where you're coming from. There's no dissuading you, huh?" He laughs a little. "You've got some bad influences, my boy."

The man stands up and sets the contract on the coffee table, stretching his back. Izuku scrambles to follow, his skin prickling with nerves.

"You… you're not mad?" He asks.

"About the Hawks thing? Oh, I'm furious." Yagi leans forward and swipes Izuku's hair, and the boy's lips twitch up. "If I'm honest, though, I can't say I've never done rash things like that when I was your age. I'd be a big hypocrite to yell at you over something like that. You're not hurt, and that's the important thing. I trust now you'll make smarter decisions in the future, so there's no reason for me to revisit this topic. But, if you're talking about that invitation?" He rests his hand on his student's head, and the weight of it has Izuku looking at the floor. "I'm not upset about that either. If anything, I'm proud that you're mature enough to think these things through logically. Now, working with the commission, especially as you are, is dangerous. Even I know that. But, hey, if this is truly the best thing for you, and everything this says is true…" He glances out the dark windows. "I say there's no harm in looking into it."

A little bit of excitement courses through Izuku upon hearing this. All Might understands his predicament and viewpoint better now. He's allowing Izuku to consider this! Having the approval of his master does something weird to Izuku.

It's validating. It's pleasing. It just makes Izuku feel *right*.

When was the last time he's felt like this?

"I'm glad you showed me this," Yagi adds, moving his hands to his hips. That teasing look is back. "You could've just as easily hid it, you know! I can't believe Hawks decided to give this to you tonight."

"He is an opportunist, All Might."

"I suppose you're right." He takes off his shoes and places them by the entrance, having been too preoccupied to do so before. He then places his keys and other things on the counter with Izuku following. "But next time, please tell me if a situation like that arises again. I hate to think that during dinner you felt uncomfortable and threatened by Hawks' presence. Endeavor certainly didn't make things better, I bet. That's not an environment I should have invited you into, so I'm sorry for that."

"It's not like you knew Hawks would be there," Izuku assures. "Besides, I, uh, I kinda liked it? Dinner was overall really good besides the whole, well, you know. Dessert was delicious!"

"Oh, yeah? You should've saved me some slices."

"You can't have too much sugar," Izuku points out. "But maybe I can make some of that stuff for you one day. Satou sent me some recipes, so I can change 'em up!"

"Ah, that boy does bring in some amazing pastries sometimes. I look forward to it." Yagi gives Izuku a pointed look when they reach the base of the stairs going up. "It's really late, though, even for you and I. You should wash up and head to bed. We'll have some time to talk a lot more about this all in the morning. Oh, and I also have some fast-action healing cream in that bathroom up there for you to use if needed."

Izuku thanks him and tells him goodnight. When Yagi turns to head to his own room, Izuku can't help but stop him.

"Hey, Yagi?"

Yagi glances back. "Yes?"

"You're not going to tell them about this yet, right?"

Aizawa will kill me, and then Yama will kill Hawks. Overall not a very good day for hero society…

This seems to remind Yagi of something. He walks back over to Izuku quickly. “Why, of course not!” A sinister grin splits across his face, and he hands Izuku back his phone. “Tomorrow, *you* are.”

Izuku doesn’t even deserve to complain.

Izuku can confidently say that All Might’s little realm is the best out of all the others.

When he walks through, he’s greeted by blinding lights. It’s bright, almost to the point of making Izuku question if he just died in his dreams and was sent straight to the pearly gates.

It’s weirdly moist inside, like a morning right after a night of rain. Below him is tall grass and dandelions and various little creatures running about. Birds chirp in the distance, and hills crest up and then flatten into nice meadows for deer.

Somehow, Izuku isn’t surprised by this. He knew Yagi’s would be the nicest.

A squirrel climbs up Izuku’s leg and then uses his shoulder as a jumping off point to get on top of a slippery tree. Izuku giggles and holds his arm out for another smaller squirrel to follow.

As he explores, he doesn’t find All Might—or, more appropriately, his vestige. He must be somewhere else right now.

But he *does* find his own vestige. Which is a weird thing.

Shimura said that Izuku’s One for All vestige rarely ever leaves his realm, so this is a surprise. Maybe Izuku visiting here has changed something.

His vestige is sitting by a waterfall with a hand dipped into the water, letting the fine spray of mist wash over him and his cloudy wings.

Izuku walks closer and finds that he's playing with the rainbow colored fish swimming about. They jump out of the water and flip around, and Vestige Izuku only watches.

Fucking weirdo, Izuku thinks, as if he himself isn't engrossed in watching the intricate dances the fish perform. He stomps up to the vestige and hikes up a superpowered foot, planning to kick his counterpart into the water.

He's not a fan of the plain outfit he's wearing. In a whole fucking dreamworld where you can make up anything you want and wear it, Izuku isn't sure why Vestige Izuku isn't more fashionable. It's super embarrassing. Granted, Vestige Izuku is literally wearing nothing but dark green and black smoke (as he has been all this time) with little hints of red lightning coiling around in there, but still.

Before Izuku's foot can reach him, though, Vestige Izuku's hand is shooting back to grab his ankle. In one smooth yank, Izuku is being thrown over his shoulder and into the pond.

Which, deserved. But also, *fuck.*

When Izuku manages to scramble out of the freezing cold water, disrupting the fish's dance as he does so, the vestige is already gone.

"Bitch!" Izuku shouts into the realm, his voice echoing through the meadows.

He shivers, waiting for his clothes to dry up. Deciding that he's had enough of Yagi's realm for now and will continue his search for the core at a later time, Izuku makes his way out. The common area of One for All is bustling with energy, with En, Banjou, and Shinomori being at their respective chairs and talking to each other.

Izuku avoids them, instead going to the far north of the territory—he just wants to make a mental map of the place. He's gotta see where everything is.

So far, he's been to most of the realms. They're all in separate corners and sides, and they're not in order. They're scattered about, almost like seeds in a field.

He's only allowed in a few of them; Second and Third don't allow him in theirs, not that he cares. They haven't even shown themselves to Izuku yet, although the boy swears he's heard them walking around and has felt them looking at him at times.

Today, after another stretch of time of aimless wandering, he finally comes upon First's. This archway is smaller than the others, but the inside is transparent, so while Izuku isn't allowed in here either (why is he surprised?) he can still get a glimpse of it. It's foggy and blue in there, like how a sad Monday morning in a forest feels.

It all seems so still on the other side. There's not a flicker of light or movement. It's almost uncanny.

Izuku gives it a six out of ten. It almost has the vibe of teenage angst, and that's saying something coming from him.

He walks past the realm, casting a longful glance back in its direction as he goes. Maybe one day he'll get a chance to be in all of the realms. It might be cool.

Is One for All like a universe by itself? Does it expand forever and ever? Izuku wonders if there's an end. Maybe it'll be like those old civilizations thought, where the world is actually flat and eventually you will just get to the edge and fall. Is that what One for All is?Or is it more like a loop? Will Izuku reach his own realm eventually if he keeps walking in this direction, past all the other ones?

There's darkness as far as he can see. The galaxies above shimmer and move around, allowing for a nice light show for Izuku to look at as he goes.

What if he gets lost? Will one of the users look for him? No, that's dumb. He can always just wake himself up and then spawn back in his realm when he next goes to sleep. He has nothing to worry about.

It could be ten minutes that passes with him just walking aimlessly, or ten hours—Izuku wouldn't know, as time is distorted here. He still hasn't figured out the exact time difference between here and the outside world. Maybe he should try to find out next time he visits.

These thoughts are dumped from his mind when he hears whispering up ahead.

He stops in his tracks, alert. Is his loop theory about to be proven true? Is he going to come up on the other users?

But as Izuku moves toward the sounds, the more unsure he is that they belong to the others. He can't pick out one singular voice until he gets even closer. The whispering stops all at once, allowing for Izuku to clearly hear what's said next.

Live.

Izuku's brow furrows. His pace slows a little, only to pick back up. The word was commanding and smooth. It almost sounded like a snake's hiss.

Curious, Izuku continues on to find the source.

You?

He's closer now. He can feel it in his bones. His feet are moving on their own accord now, almost on instinct. Izuku lets it happen.

The whispers start up again, and they're coming from all sides. He looks around, but there's no one but himself here.

"Okay," he mutters to himself, briefly wondering if he's that stupid person in horror movies who goes to investigate strange noises in the basement alone. "That's a little creepy, but—"

Now.

There it is: a light other than black. Izuku walks faster, noting how the galaxies above are disappearing the closer he gets. The stars are all washed away, leaving only Izuku and the voice.

Here?

Izuku can't help but be confused. Because now he's here, standing in front of a dark archway, and facing a tenth realm.

Ten. This one isn't a repeat, right? He's certain he hasn't come across this one before. He's already seen all the others! He knows they can change appearances, but this one just feels different than all the rest somehow…

There are only nine users of One for All, he thought. *He's* the ninth one! So why is this one out here alone? Why does it exist?

He peers through the archway, the hairs at the back of his neck rising. It's… dark in there. It's all empty and devoid of life, similar to how First's looked. Actually, it sort of looks like *Extract's* demon-infested arena. The ground is made of that water that reflects everything around it. The horizon in the distance is a deep, blood red, and as Izuku's eyes move up to the sky, he notes that the red turns into a starless black color. It's a satisfying gradient, but it makes Izuku shiver

all the same.

Whose is this?

Holding his breath, Izuku moves his hand toward the archway, and he gasps a little when it actually goes through without much effort. He's allowed in! He didn't actually think he would be. He sticks his head in next, and then pulls out and shoves his knee through too, giggling at the sensation. It feels a lot more airy in the realm than he thought it would be. It's more welcoming and familiar than any of the other ones he's been in.

Izuku laughs at the chills that go up his arms once he shoves his other hand through again. It tickles! When he's about to stop messing around and finally go inside to check the place out, just as he's done for some of the others, a hand grabs his shirt from behind.

To say he screams would be an understatement. He *shrieks* , his voice incredibly high-pitched, and falls back, arms waving wildly at whatever is touching him to get away.

He falls on his ass unceremoniously, and he's surprised to find that it actually fucking hurts. It's not often he feels pain in this world—it seems to only happen in certain circumstances.

About to snap at whatever decided to touch him, Izuku looks up, glaring—only for the words to die before they can escape his throat.

Oh.

A man with straight white hair that falls to his shoulders stares down at him, looking almost clueless. He's wearing a white shirt with tan sweatpants, and Izuku sees he has a small, beaded bracelet on his left wrist. His arm is still outstretched from when he presumably grabbed Izuku.

But that's not what Izuku is focused on. All Izuku can think about right now is the man's bright green eyes. His pupils are white, rimmed with black, and they quite literally take Izuku's breath away.

These are *his* eyes.

Well, fuck. Izuku chokes, immediately clamming up. A flush settles over his skin, and he bets that if there were a mirror around here he'd look like a tomato right about now. His luck is just unbeatable!

When the first user of One for All only blinks at him, making no move to speak first, Izuku stutters out a response. “Oh, uh, I’m sorry! *So* sorry! Is this one yours? I thought the other one was so I didn’t, uh, I didn’t realize this one was—was probably yours, too! I was just kinda curious, and you probably know how I am, *haha,* and—ah, not that that makes it right! I was just saying I wasn’t doing anything suspicious! Or—or malicious! Or any other *icious.”*

First looks at the archway, then at Izuku. He keeps silent.

Izuku wills himself to wake up. Right now, preferably. “Can you even have multiple realms? I mean, you’re Yoi—I mean First! So you can probably have two because you’re, well, you, so I shouldn’t have just assumed; that’s kinda rude. I should’ve knocked! Definitely knocked. Or, uh, I mean asked! Because there’s no door, right? Not that you *have* to have one! Who needs doors, amirite? Mine were always being eaten by termites, so trust me, I’m not judging! I’m probably, like, the least judgmental person here. Er, least judgmental person *alive!”* Izuku winces. “Shit, wait, sorry, that was really insens—”

“This realm isn’t mine,” First says, cutting off Izuku’s spiel. His words are smooth like butter, and they have an almost musical cadence.

Izuku stays on the ground with his mouth still open, gawking.

It’s hard to grasp the idea that this… this man right here is All for One’s brother. He was the starter of One for All. He was the *first* to fight back against the living devil. And probably the first to die.

He’s also technically Izuku’s…

After another moment, First offers a hand. It’s a slender hand. The fingers are long, and they’re not crooked or screwed up at all. These are an artist’s hands, Izuku thinks. Or maybe a pianist’s?

The boy only continues to stare, still shocked. Is he dreaming right now? Actually, he is dreaming, but what he means is is he dreaming *inside* of his dream? Would that be considered dreamception? Is that a thing?

First slowly retracts the offer and tips his head, white strands falling in his face. “Is it comfortable down there?”

Izuku starts. “No! No, it’s—it’s not!” He scrambles up, embarrassed, only to realize how close First is to him now. He’s almost touching him! He squeaks and takes a step back—right inside the realm.

First lurches forward to grab his wrist before he can fall all the way through. He yanks him back, eyes wide.

Izuku straightens up quickly and takes a few healthy paces away from both First and the unknown realm. “Thanks,” he gasps, shuddering. Falling through an archway doesn’t feel so nice when you’re not meaning to do it. He figures intention matters when it comes to things like that.

“It’s alright,” comes his soft reply.

Izuku rubs at his arms, feeling somehow terribly exposed. His eyes dart around, but there are no other users he can see. First must have just found him by himself.

Why is Izuku so hesitant? He was kind of hoping he’d get to see his— his— *First* sometime soon, but now that he’s here, now that he’s staring the man directly in the face, he’s anxious. Maybe having someone like Vestige All Might or Shimura would’ve been nice to hide behind for this. Is that cowardice? He doesn’t know, and honestly he doesn’t care.

“I’m sorry I’ve been absent as of late,” First begins, and he has a small smile on his face. It’s almost bashful. “I meant to greet you alongside the others when you first arrived that night, but I couldn’t make it.”

Izuku quickly waves his apology away. “No, it’s alright! I know you’re probably busy doing, uh… important things.”

First frowns a little. “There isn’t a lot to do when you’re dead, actually.”

Izuku winces and laughs nervously. He puts a hand at the back of his neck, unsure of how to respond. It’s alright, though, as First seems to be talkative enough for the two of them now.

“So, how are you liking this place?” He asks Izuku.

“It’s great, sir. I—I mean I haven’t been in here a whole lot, but it’s all really interesting.” He gestures to where the other realms are in the far distance. “It’s just really cool to think about and explore.”

“And the others?”

“Er, do I like them?” At First’s nod, Izuku continues, feeling more relaxed. “I’ve only met a few of them. I haven’t seen, uh, Second or

Third yet, but I think they're nice based on what the others said." He looks away and adds in a lower tone, "For the most part."

First accepts this answer and tips his head. It reminds Izuku suddenly of Uraraka. "I'm glad, then. This is new to us all as well, so we're still trying to figure out everything in order to best help you. If you ever need anything, we'll be here."

Izuku wants to say that it's not like they *could* be anywhere else, but he refrains. He appreciates the sentiment, especially since it means a lot more to him coming from First personally.

The boy shifts on his feet, awkward now. He can't stop looking at First; it's so weird.

Hearing stories of All for One and his brother, Izuku's *uncle,* and then seeing him here, right in front of him—maybe not in his physical form, but seeing him here nonetheless—is an indescribable feeling. Izuku is still checking if he's in a dreamception scenario even though he knew that one day he'd have to face this man eventually.

First gestures to the archway. "How did you find this one?" He isn't mad or annoyed when he asks, only curious.

"Oh, I just… I was just kinda led here? I was looking at all the other ones and… and I just sort of found it?"

"You found it?"

Izuku stares at him, cautious. "Yes?"

First falls silent, seeming to ponder something. Izuku feels his heart beat even faster. Did he say something wrong? Was he not supposed to tell the truth? Is this some sort of test?

Izuku can't take it anymore. "Sir?"

First looks at him again, eyes twinkling. "Do you not like my name?" He asks, clearly teasing. It's such an abrupt change that Izuku flinches back.

"Huh?"

"I'm certain you know it. You can use that if you prefer it, Ninth. I'm not so sure that *sir* is a fitting title." He stares past him and into the archway. "I was technically only a few years older than you are now

before I left the earth. But *sir* makes me feel, well, as ancient as I most certainly am to you."

Izuku's throat tightens. Now that he's thinking about it, his uncle does look no older than twenty-something. He was young when he died, wasn't he? This thought makes Izuku shrink in on himself.

"First is just fine, too," the man assures, unbothered by Izuku's turmoil. "We have a habit of calling each other by the numbers you gave us. It's nice, and also fitting."

"Got it, Mr. First." Izuku breathes out quickly and jumps onto the next topic, wanting to get away from the mention of death completely. "Er, may I ask you a question?"

"I hope I can answer it."

"This realm… the thing is, I counted ten of them in here, but there's only nine of us, right? So why is this one here if it's not yours? Is it one of the other users' realms?"

Yoichi lifts up one shoulder. "It's your father's."

"Oh, I guess that makes sense. I should've realized th—" Izuku's mouth dries up. His vision goes blurry, and he coughs harshly.

He's so surprised, in fact, that for a second he can't even breathe. He chokes on air and puts his hands on his knees, bending over to try and open up his lungs.

"What?" He exclaims between pants, his head wrenching up to meet First's concerned gaze.

"Surely you know how One for All came to be?" First turns to face him fully, bending down a little to match Izuku's height. "When my brother gave me enhancements to try and help me become not as sickly, that's when I discovered my own dormant quirk. It is because of that first power that One for All even exists."

"No, I—I *know* that! But how does he—!" Izuku breaks off, because he suddenly *gets* it. He doesn't know how he never thought of this as a possibility himself.

"A quirk carries a little bit of the user's soul along with it, even after they're dead and gone. That's why you have those monsters in your other realm," First explains. "A bit of All for One remained in the

enhancement quirk he gave to me, even though it wasn't originally his. So, when I received it, and One for All was borne as consequence, it is only logical that he would be part of this realm. One for All stockpiles all quirks, as you know. Including that enhancement one."

Izuku smacks his cheeks, trying to wrap his head around all this. It makes sense, of course, but it's just so bizarre to think about! "If—if Father is—is in there because of that crappy enhancement power he gave you, does that mean that the original owner of that quirk is in there too?"

First hums in question. "I imagine it's a possibility. Though they're so old by now that I highly doubt they'd be able to separate themselves from All for One. I assume they're gone, lost to the universe. Or perhaps so weak that they don't even have a form."

They're probably dead for a second time…

Izuku nods in understanding and then forces himself to move beside First. There's a new kind of fire inside him, feeding his eagerness and disbelief. If Father is actually in there, even in a little vestige form, Izuku wants to *know.* He needs to know.

If it's a full realm, would his memories be locked up in there?

Izuku's eyes brighten. "Do you want to go explore it with me?"

Wordlessly, First steps forward and holds up his hand, pressing it against the invisible shield. It doesn't go through, however, surprising Izuku.

The boy gapes. "You can't go in?" *But he's your brother? Wouldn't it make sense for blood relatives to automatically get a pass?*

First shakes his head. "Only you can, it seems. The others can't go in either. We have all checked."

Izuku shivers. "What does that mean?"

"Only my brother knows. But, for now, Ninth, I don't advise you to go in. Each realm, as I'm sure you know, holds distant memories and fragments of thoughts. The realm itself even mirrors the personality of the user. It's ever changing. Considering this realm belongs to an untrue wielder of One for All, it is not exactly complete. I would even say it's breaking. Which makes it extremely dangerous for you."

Izuku doesn't quite understand. "But if there are memories in there, doesn't that mean I can sorta see what he's been doing recently?" He tries to catch his straying gaze. "I—I can *spy* on him, right? I can see what he's been up to! Maybe I can hear his most recent plans!" He gasps, his brain moving fast. "I can prevent even more attacks! I—all of them! I know he has more things he wants to do, so if I can just take a look at them all, it'll help us!"

Yoichi's face darkens. "I don't think that's how this works. As I said, it's not a true realm, since he is not actually a weirder of One for All. He only helped create it. I'm currently unsure if my brother is even aware he has a place in here. This could be a mere untruthful manifestation of his DNA inside that enhancement quirk. The vestige inside his realm—if there even is one—is trapped inside there. It has not come out here even once, so I don't think it can." His eyes narrow dangerously. "And I don't want to think of what it might do if someone enters its domain."

It? Izuku wrinkles his nose. He's talking about All for One like he's some creature. Which, of course, All for One is a monster in his own right, but calling him an *it,* even in reference to his vestige, feels kind of… wrong.

Wait a minute, didn't Izuku call his own vestige an *it* for a little while at the beginning? Should he even be talking?

"I can't die here, Mr. First," Izuku reminds, but the white-haired man isn't convinced.

"That's not what I'm most concerned about," he says.

Izuku shakes himself. "But if I'm allowed in, that has to mean something!" He takes a step forward, eyes wild with his heart thumping outside of his chest. Is he kidding? Does First really want to miss out on all the opportunities this could bring just because of some misplaced fear? "This could be great for us all! I could just—"

First's hand grabs the space between his neck and shoulder, gripping him hard. He stops Izuku clean in his tracks. "Don't," he commands, voice suddenly sharp, and it's a weird thing, really, the way the word enters Izuku's mind. It feels almost like it's going through his bloodstream. It travels to his very core and stays there, preventing all of Izuku's motor movements. He can't even move away or shrug off First's hand, much less breathe!

But then First is releasing him just as quickly as he grabbed him, and

Izuku is free again, his chest constricted now. “I apologize,” the man says, and this time he’s looking up at the sky with hazy eyes.

Woah. That… was sort of cool. But also so incredibly infuriating. Izuku can’t even stay mad for long, however. “What was that?” He asks, in awe.

“It was something I will try not to use again,” First replies simply. He sighs softly, but even that sounds graceful. “Ninth, why don’t you go see the others? I think Seventh has been calling for you.”

“But what about this realm?” Izuku protests, and he hates that it sounds like a whine. “We need to use this to our advantage now that —!”

“All for One’s presence is not going anywhere,” First reassures levely. “I will continue to monitor this place as I have been doing. For now, you should see Shimura. You are about to wake up, and she sounds urgent.”

This momentarily distracts Izuku from the very important topic at hand. “Urgent? You can hear her?”

First stares at him through vibrant, piercing eyes. “Of course. I can hear everyone at all times. It’s a chore to keep them all out of my head, just as I’m sure we can be quite the hassle to you.” He gestures in the direction of the common area, and while his face is still so kind, Izuku knows an order when he sees one.

That was just the look All for One used to give him when he was trying to be nice back then too. But the question here is if First is genuinely being kind or if he’s acting too. Izuku would like to think it’s the first one. He can’t feel his emotions here, unfortunately. His stupid feelings quirk is useless.

Izuku sucks in his indignance and questions and bows lowly in goodbye, turning to reluctantly walk away. When he glances back, he sees First sitting down just outside the archway of the realm with his legs folded beneath him.

Before he runs off, though, First’s call reaches his ears.

“Ninth?”

Izuku pauses, heart skipping a beat. “Yes, sir?” The honorific slips out instinctually, but First doesn’t seem to care now.

“If you hear the whispers again, don’t follow them. They’re only heard by us, and that’s reason enough to leave them alone.”

With his breath suspended, Izuku can only nod before turning and scampering off to where the common area is. It’s good to know that Izuku isn’t the only one who can hear the whispering, but it’s also creepy. What does he mean by that? Was the voice a bad thing? What did it belong to? It’s freaking him out now, especially since Izuku is sure that that same voice is the one he hears sometimes now when he’s *not* dreaming.

Oh, Izuku wishes he could know what his uncle is thinking.

Chapter End Notes

a little short, but needed. up next? something is revealed to the world :) and izuku deals with both the consequences and rewards

the ofa realm (and yoichi specifically) reminds me of this song treehouse - alex g :(

e

talk to me

Chapter Notes

some tensions between izuku and another one of his teachers

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku sits on a chair outside Principal Nezu's office. He's looking at the tile beneath him and swinging his feet.

His blurry reflection stares back. It should be illegal, honestly. What's the point in paying so much money for cleaners to make the floor polished? Why do they need it to be *that* clean? Izuku doesn't like dirt, of course, as he always made sure to keep his apartment clean and free from as many bugs as he could control, but he's not this bad.

Is UA so clean and tidy and white just to uphold a prestigious image? Or is Nezu a germaphobe? Maybe that's why the vents are so clean nowadays. If Nezu is using them, he might not want to get his fur dirty. Izuku wonders suddenly if the mammal uses pet shampoo or human shampoo. Does he have a separate bottle for his hair and skin? Or is it the same?

Does he moisturize? Maybe he gets dandruff. Does he clip his own nails? Or does he go to a groomer? Is that wrong to ask?

"Are you kidding me?"

There are many places that provide services for mutants who need special care, but since Nezu is quite literally a whole rodent who was experimented on and turned intelligent, does he count? He's not a true mutant, so would they let him in? Well, it's not like they could say *no.* But would Nezu even go to places like that? What would be the protocol?

"Yamada, I will have to ask you to lower your voice—"

Perhaps he clips his own nails and grooms himself. He certainly seems to be the type. He's very peculiar. He likes things to be organized—well, in his own chaotic way. Izuku might ask him one day if he works up the courage. Does he file his nails?

Not many people do, to be fair. Most just clip them and go to a nail salon. But Auntie clips them herself all the time. She's always

grooming herself. While she's on the phone, while she's outside having coffee, while she's watching a TV show and complaining about how stupid it is. Masaru does it too. His toenails are spectacular!

Er, not in a weird way. It's just that generally people don't take as good a care of their toes as they do their hands. Mitsuki and Masaru could be hand and feet models—hell, they're already halfway there! They're fashion designers for big name companies. They literally own the runways. Even forgetting the feet, they could just be general models. They take such good care of themselves that they don't look their age at all!

Kacchan is definitely their kid. He looks great, too. His skin is flawless.

"There aren't any other students here, so why should I be quiet? This is insane, Nezu! What you're suggesting, it—it's all shit!"

Izuku breathes in deeply, closing his eyes as he imagines Kacchan's face in his mind. Kacchan is gorgeous. His features are just flawless. Looking at him is like looking at an art piece in a museum—you just can't look away. You can't get enough of it.

Izuku certainly can't get enough of him.

"I've only stated the obvious, which is that it would be foolish of us to overlook this opportunity when it has quite literally fallen into our grasp. This is a great thing for our student, Yamada."

"Great? You think this is great? He's a vigilante! Have you seen his records? It doesn't matter if it's been proven or not—the media says he's a murderer, so in the world's eye, he is! This won't work the way you think!"

Izuku breathes out, and his eyes open. His legs stop swinging.

"I think you may be missing an important detail in—"

"They are going to ruin him, Nezu. Rabbit needs to be shut down! Not groomed into some kind of 'hero' by agents who don't even have a real name anymore! This contract sounds all great on that damn paper, but that's not how it will be in action and you know it. Why are we even considerin' this, huh? You all have gotta see what I see here, man…"

Each tile is five feet wide and six feet long. It's not even, meaning that some tiles are cut in half when it reaches the walls. Izuku doesn't like

that. It feels disgusting to even acknowledge.

He's never liked the administration wing. It's all wrong, and he could never figure out why before. Perhaps he knows now.

"I understand the concern, but we don't know everything they're proposing yet. This was a mere message. Later, I'm sure he will receive a detailed, more official invitation."

"Nezu…" Yamada's voice is low, like he's gritting his teeth. *"Do you have any idea what they'll do to him once we hand him over?"*

"We're not handing anyone over," Yagi speaks up, sounding flushed as he tries to reassure his coworker. *"Please just hear me out. It doesn't sound like they want full control over him. They just want to be associated with him! They'll use Rabbit to look better in light of the recent attacks, and it'll also save them some face, seeing as they've been unable to capture him thus far. If it's revealed he's working with them, it will look like that was their master plan all along. That's all they seem to want!"*

There's a screech of a chair. *"Yagi, do you really think they've just been unable to capture him? If the Commission truly wanted to bring him in before, he would be with them. Right. Now. They've just been waiting. They probably did plan all of this. They waited until he was at his lowest, at his weakest state, and now they're trying to swoop in and dig their claws in."*

Izuku winces. Lowest? He didn't think he was at his lowest. Sure, he's been a lot more vulnerable lately, and he's been… *feeling* a lot more, but he didn't ever think that that was… that it made him look…

Rabbit isn't weaker, right? He thought he was getting stronger. He's been injured quite a lot lately, but what's a little pain? He's fine!

Snipe is who speaks next. Most of Izuku's teachers are in the room, minus Cementoss, Kan, and Kayama. *"All of ya are overreacting. I say we wait until we actually have more info before jumping to these conclusions. It's pointless to be so high strung."*

Yagi huffs in relief. *"Yes, I agree."*

"Oh, c'mon!" Yamada doesn't seem to want to calm down. *"Am I the only one in here who sees what's wrong with this?"*

"Mic," Aizawa says, surprisingly calm.

"What? I can't be the odd one out here!"

Izuku's phone buzzes. He ignores it.

The light coming in from the windows dims when clouds cover the sky. It casts a shadow over Izuku, who is still sitting with his back against the chair. He stares out into the front of the school, wishing he could be anywhere else but here. The weekend isn't long enough. He loves UA, as he said before, but it's tiring sometimes to be here. He wishes the weekend would be longer—maybe three days!

Well, maybe he would be more excited to be at UA if he didn't practically live here every day before and after class. That sort of thing changes how you think about things.

"Rabbit would have a seamless transition from criminal to hero in training. He wouldn't have to pay for any of his past crimes." There's a beat of tense silence following Nezu's statement. *"Isn't that our goal here, gentlemen?"*

"Seamless, my ass."

Yagi coughs. *"I spoke to Young Midoriya about this whole thing last night. It's—it's important to realize how he feels about this too. You weren't there to hear what he said to me. You don't quite understand how—"*

Izuku abruptly stands up from his chair. It knocks against the wall, but he doesn't care. He walks swiftly away from the office, deciding that he's done eavesdropping.

He wants to work on his projects in Nezu's workshop, but that would require going into his office—through their little conference. That's definitely not something Izuku is going to do, so he opts for something else.

What he's going to do is bomb the entire building.

Now, hear him out for a second. He uses the term bomb very lightly. A bomb could be many things. It could be a weapon of mass destruction that causes trauma that will never, ever go away, or it could be something less dangerous but still impactful in its own way.

Take his old glitter bombs, for example. Anything that explodes is a bomb, and *his* bombs never actually harmed anyone. They were really just demonstrations! They served a purpose, even if that purpose was just to annoy someone at times, so they were impactful.

All Izuku is going to do now is give UA a nice remake. It's pretty dull.

It's too white. It's too… pristine. Izuku wants color. He wants it to be bright. He wants *lights*.

So, logically, he's going to bomb it with color.

The best way to do that is by planting programmed holograms all around the school that connect to the electrical systems run by the security department—and it should be noted that the head of the security department is Nezu. He also makes up all the other security members besides Hound Dog and Ectoplasm.

So, this will be a hard challenge. The holograms will run any light shows that Izuku wants and even blast music at any time.

For his first scheme, Izuku wants to have UA start a light show in the middle of the night, complete with dubstep and other intricate mixes. It will be seen by the entire city! It won't actually hurt anyone, as the volume won't be *too* loud and no one will be on campus by then, so Izuku is good to go.

He stole these lights from the Club a long time ago and refined them to be much better and lighter. He would replicate them every time he had some spare parts on hand so he could have hundreds of tiny ones. He lost most of that work when his apartment blew up, but it's a good thing Nezu has near limitless money and provides Izuku with most of the tech he wants.

Izuku has about a thousand tiny light probes to test out now.

Before Izuku can actually go to his stash in the vents and bring his work to life, he feels a flash of energy up ahead. He straightens up and smooths down his *I'm going to commit about fifteen crimes right now* expression just as Kayama rounds the corner.

"Hi, Ms. Kayama," he greets, walking along as if he has somewhere innocent to be.

"Hello, kid." Her eyes narrow suspiciously when Izuku passes her. "Wait. Hit the brakes."

Izuku freezes. *I am literally just walking. Please let me keep walking, please let me—*

"You look a little pale. You have enough caffeine today?"

Izuku blanches and whips around to stare at her. "Caffeine?"

“Yeah. It’s that thing that motivates ya and keeps you awake. You missing that?” She doesn’t wait for a reply before grabbing him by the shoulder and tugging him along. “Come on. I was just gonna get a slushee at the corner store. You can get one too.”

A slushee? At the store? Ooh. Izuku’s heart leaps at this idea, as he loves slushees, but his brain turns on its thinking side at the last moment. “Oh, that sounds great, but I don’t think I can. They told me to stay inside, so I’m not really supposed to be—”

Kayama groans. “Those buffoons can shove it. We’ll be gone for just a few minutes. Come on.”

She doesn’t give him much of a choice before dragging him along to the entrance of the school. They pass right by Nezu’s office, where his other teachers’ conversation can still be clearly heard. Izuku stares at his shoes when he picks out some of what they’re saying.

Kayama looks at him out of the corner of her eye. “They talk loud, huh?”

Izuku nods. “Yeah.”

He wants them to stop arguing. There’s over an hour left before students start to arrive before classes, but Izuku still doesn’t know why they’re being so divided about everything. They don’t need to be so worried.

He thought he had everything covered. He and All Might already had a little plan.

Sure, he didn’t exactly tell the others a lot, and he sort of dropped it all on them at once, but what else was he supposed to do?

When Izuku walks into the teacher’s lounge upon arriving at UA with Yagi in tow, he sees Yamada immediately. The man is standing by the coffee machine and making some sort of latte. He greets Izuku warmly and ruffles his hair, asking him how it all went.

But Izuku can only blink at him, mind on autopilot. “Hawks is trying to recruit me into being an agent for the Commission.”

The entire room falls into a dead silence. The other teachers turn to stare at him from their computers, wide-eyed and confused, and Aizawa spills some of his own fresh coffee on himself.

All Might groans and whacks Izuku upside the head before palming his face. "Really, my boy?"

Izuku glares at him indignantly. "Why'd you do that! You said be straight up!"

"Not that straight up!"

And so it went.

Kayama leads him through the doors and out the gates, blowing her bubblegum. It's her signature flavor: Midnight Raspberry. Izuku wants some but doesn't ask for any.

He's holding out for the promise of a Coca-Cola flavored slushee.

He'll continue his devious work afterwards.

The light show is set to begin at midnight, and it's only ten o'clock, so all Izuku has to do is will himself to sleep. He can't be awake during that time or else he'll look suspicious.

These days, he doesn't mind sleeping. Not when he has One for All to delve into. He's not scared of his dreams so much anymore. His curiosity and need to see the other users sometimes outweighs his fears.

But just as Izuku is putting his phone on charge and about to suffocate himself with his pillow, there's a knock on the door.

He never thought he'd ever say this, and he feels bad the moment he does, but when he recognizes Yamada's quirk signature, he can't help but feel disappointed. It's not that he's upset with Yamada, not at all! It's just that today he's been weirdly… distant. He was sharper and a little snappier than usual during class, and the other students noticed it too. Kacchan gave him a *what the fuck happened to him* look when the bell rang and they had to leave for lunch, but Izuku didn't have anything good to say in response.

Yamada was, dare Izuku say, Aizawa-like.

He even ignored Izuku's raised hand today in class, which honestly could have just been a coincidence or an accident, he recognizes that, but that doesn't stop him from feeling a little sad about it.

Yamada always makes sure to call on him at least once, even when Izuku didn't volunteer, so *something* was off today. And Izuku has a pretty good guess as to why that is.

The man rarely ever raises his voice when he's angry. He only ever uses his quirk outside of villain fights when he's excited or trying to get the class's attention. But this morning, the tone of voice he was using was just… so unlike him. Or maybe it is like him and Izuku is only just now seeing it in action.

Or maybe it's that Izuku has grown more sensitive.

The car ride home was silent, too. Aizawa talked to Izuku, and Izuku teased back, but Yamada was uncharacteristically the quiet one in the car this time. Which never happens. Usually Izuku or Aizawa is the one being angsty with a refusal to speak.

And Izuku didn't miss the way Aizawa kept his hand comfortably on his husband's leg the whole way he was driving, which *also* never happens. There's some sort of tension going on, something that's making Yamada upset, and Izuku doesn't like it.

"Hey, I'm coming in," Yamada warns from the other side of the door. He waits a few moments for any possible denial just in case, and only then does he enter.

Izuku greets him and sits up straighter, back against the headboard. The man has his hair down, and he has his red glasses on, putting more emphasis on his freckles.

"What are you up to?" Yamada asks, but his voice is a little tight.

"I was about to sleep," Izuku admits.

"I didn't ruin that, did I?" He tries for a smile, but Izuku doesn't give him one. When Izuku only shakes his head, pulling his knees up to his chest, Yamada clears his throat and gets to the point. "I just came in here to ask if there was anything you wanted to talk to me about."

Immediately, Izuku's soul leaves him. An electric jolt goes through his entire body, and his lips part. "Wh—what?" He says breathlessly, high-pitched.

No one ever says that kind of thing unless they already know what they're talking about. Guardians only say that when they're giving the kid a chance to come clean about a lie or something they did! So what could Yamada possibly be referring to? What does he know?

Damn, what *did* Izuku do? Does Yamada know about the light show that's about to happen back at UA? There's no way!

"You're not in trouble, if that's what you're worried about, listener." One of Yamada's perfectly plucked brows quirks up. "Though that reaction of yours just now tells me *I* should be worried, but I'll ignore that." He makes his way further into the room, crossing his arms. "I meant it genuinely. I… know that things can't be easy for you right now, with the whole Commission thing and whatnot. And I obviously can't say I know exactly what you're going through or how you're feeling, so I wanted to make sure everything was alright, yeah?"

He's asking if *Izuku* is alright? Seriously?

The boy nods. "I'm okay!"

A line forms between Yamada's brows. "Really?"

"Yeah!"

"You weren't… scared or anything? When Hawks came up to you like that?"

This makes Izuku pause. He isn't sure what Yamada is getting at here. "I knew he wouldn't hurt me with All Might there."

"But when All Might wasn't there?"

Izuku doesn't answer for a long moment. "I… wasn't concerned about what he'd do to me," he says.

Yamada pushes up his glasses. "So, what were you concerned about?"

Izuku shrugs and looks at Missy, who is on top of his desk on the other side of the room and watching with mismatched eyes. He's about to respond but then remembers just who he's talking to. He didn't tell All Might about how Hawks technically threatened them. He threatened the whole school, really, and its credibility. He threatened *All Might*.

That's what Izuku was more concerned about then. That's what he was angry about, along with what happened at the Club.

But why would Izuku tell anyone that? Why would he tell Yamada especially, who voiced his very loud opinions that morning, about that? It would only solidify Yamada's thoughts that they shouldn't be considering the contract at all.

"Dunno," is what Izuku eventually settles on.

"Is that why you didn't contact us?"

Izuku's heart gives a funny jolt. "I… wasn't in danger. I thought I *would* have been in danger if I pressed the button."

Yamada sighs and sits at the very end of the bed. He searches Izuku's gaze, and Izuku tries hard to not let his eyes break away.

"I'm glad he didn't hurt you, at least." It's weird, the way he says it. Like he's not finished speaking yet. His tone goes up near the end, as if in question. As if giving Izuku a chance. Yamada tips his head. "Right?"

Izuku steadies his breathing again. "To be fair, I was sorta hurting *him,* so—"

"But that doesn't really answer my question, son." There's silence, and then: "Yagi said he thought he saw something on your neck, but he couldn't be sure. Can I see?"

Izuku nods and pulls his blanket down from his chin. Yamada leans closer and frowns, examining his skin. "It's already healed," Izuku explains, "and it was my own fault, anyway; Hawks didn't do it. I was just being careless."

It's not technically a lie. Due to the cream Izuku got from Yagi and his fast regeneration, the worst of the bruises and scrapes around his throat are now gone, leaving only mild discoloration behind. Looking at it now, you wouldn't even guess it was from a hand. That's the only reason Izuku is showing him now.

Yamada doesn't seem convinced whatsoever when he pulls back, but Izuku isn't about to push his luck further.

"You were mad this morning," Izuku says instead, wanting to push that other topic away.

"I wasn't mad."

“You sounded mad.”

This gets a smile from Yamada. “Nah. I was just *emphatic,* because sometimes I feel the Principal is a little… unsympathetic sometimes. That’s all. I wasn’t really mad.”

That’s not how it felt.

When Izuku is silent for too long, Yamada tips his head. “Are you… sure there’s not anything you’d like to talk about? It doesn’t even have to be about everything that’s been going on. Did you catch up on your TV shows? Finish your homework? Did you—”

“Do you think I’m weaker?”

Yamada blinks at him, mouth still open from when he was talking.

Izuku flushes and immediately looks away, apologetic. “Weaker than when I… came to UA, I mean.”

Yamada thinks for a long while, seeming to be careful about how he responds. “No, of course not. Why do you ask?”

Izuku picks at his clothes. “You said I was. At that meeting this morning.”

“What are you—” Yamada cuts himself off, realization dawning on his face. He forms a little *o* with his mouth and turns his attention to the floor. “You heard that, huh?”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.”

Yamada waves away the almost-apology, ignoring it completely. “Midoriya, there’s nothing wrong with having weaknesses, or—or *changing.”*

“So I am weak.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Didn’t you imply it? Izuku thinks, but doesn’t say.

Deciding that he doesn’t want to start that argument right now, as he is pretty drained, Izuku nods and doesn’t say anything further on the topic.

Yamada is playing with his hands, a nervous tic no doubt, and lets out

a breath. “Kiddo, about that contract…”

“I agree with Nezu,” Izuku says instantly, and he flinches, surprising even himself. He rushes to take it back, not sure where it came from, but somehow can’t find the words.

Yamada looks almost exasperated. “I know you do. But this kind of thing… it’s not… it’s not really for… for *one* person to decide, you know?”

“Well, technically it is, Yama. The Commission only needs one signature alongside mine to make things official.”

The blond looks him in the eye then, sounding a little more firm. “What I meant is that it’s not really for *you* to decide.”

And there it is: the hard truth. All the other times when it came to something dangerous regarding Izuku, Yamada would take care of it. He would tell Izuku to not worry about it. This is because he never thought Izuku should be able to make the decisions for himself, of course. He never actually said this aloud all those times, but now it seems like he’s finally decided to.

Something like defensiveness creeps into Izuku’s bloodstream, but he beats most of it down with a stick. “But it’s *about* me. Just me.”

“Yes, but you’re underage. And if we’re to be honest with one another, you’re not exactly the person who should be calling the shots regarding your safety. Your past behavior is a testament to that, kiddo. We’ve had this discussion before.”

“This is different,” Izuku tells him, maybe a little more desperate than intended. “And I—I can be more serious. I can change.”

“I’m sure you can, son,” Yamada says quietly. “But that stuff doesn’t happen overnight, and who knows how long this invitation extends for. With how you are right now, going along with the Commission is a terrible idea. I cannot in good faith allow you to be a part of something like that. You get what I’m saying?”

Izuku’s face screws up, and he resolutely looks away from the man. He turns onto his side, facing his window, and makes a noise in mild disagreement.

He just doesn’t get it, but how can Izuku blame him? Yamada doesn’t know what goes on in Izuku’s mind. Yamada thinks Izuku wants to get

stronger to save lives even faster, and while that's true, that's not all. Izuku *needs* to get stronger so he can stop his father and brother. He needs to get a lot stronger.

Yamada gets the hint. "We'll just have to agree to disagree for now, listener. I can see you're tired, so—"

"No," Izuku mutters, making Yamada pause.

"What?" The man asks, and Izuku still doesn't turn back when he replies.

"Yama…" He takes a long breath in. "Did you know that Hawks set the world record for being the youngest hero to ever make it to the top three?"

The bed shifts; Yamada is turning to get a better look at him. "I did know that. He likes to remind the country of that every interview I've done with him."

"He's one of the strongest," Izuku whispers then, focusing on the gray clouds moving through the night sky in the window. "And it's because the Commission trained him."

"His quirk is what makes him strong," the voice hero reminds, having caught on to what Izuku is meaning. "His abilities would make anyone overpowered."

Izuku makes a noise of frustration. "It's hard to control those individual feathers and harden them," he argues. "He can even *hear* words from far away just from listening to the vibrations. That—that takes practice. That takes *skill.* And not just inherent skill; learned skill. The *Commission* helped him with that. They drilled him on it, and he mastered his own complicated quirk in such a short amount of time. That's what I *need.* They have a wide resource network, too. I—*we* could use that."

"We? Are you talking about us or those criminals at that Club?"

Izuku sits up, his lips tugging downwards. There's something steely in Yamada's voice, and he's not a fan of it. Not one bit. He takes in Yamada's appearance and stance, noting the way he's perched on the end of the bed almost awkwardly—tense, too. Almost like he's ready to move at any moment.

Why is he so stressed?

Izuku crosses his arms tightly. “Not all of them are criminals,” he argues, but it comes out flat.

“Criminals by association,” Yamada deadpans, either not seeing or not caring about the difference.

“The Club does good things. They’re not *villains.”* Izuku’s voice breaks a little near the end despite trying to come out strong, and Yamada softens.

“I know what your goal is there, Midoriya. I know how much you all have done in place of us heroes, but you have to admit that an environment like that will only ever be a breeding ground for villains and bitterness.”

White eyes and ratty red scarves come to Izuku’s mind, and the boy despises how much of what Yamada is saying is the truth.

While the Club represents hope to a lot of people, there’s a reason it’s hidden under a law firm. There’s a reason it’s in the shadows. There’s a reason certain names are banned from being mentioned on property.

There’s a dark, bloody history following behind the Club. And there are plenty of times in its history where sweet, courageous, and determined hero-wannabes turn into cold-blooded killers after a while of waiting and fighting. It’s as Yamada said: eventually that determination turns to bitterness which turns to hatred.

Izuku saw the aftermath of it one time. And that was enough for him.

“You were stupid to come back here.”

Izuku shivers, cold rain soaking him through to the bone as he stands just behind his master. He’s not sure why they’re here, especially during this terrible storm, but he’s learned not to question anything about Akaguro Chizome.

He peeks around the man’s figure and only gets a glimpse of another person’s gun being pointed at them before he is shoved back out of sight.

“You can’t shoot me,” Chizome says, and it sounds more like a warning than anything, like metal grating on ice. “I still have an hour before my membership is revoked, you ignorant fool. That’s policy.”

“Oh, haven’t ya heard?” comes the unnamed man’s spitting reply. “The

Board named you an exception. Congrats."

There's the sound of a slide being pulled back, and Izuku's heart drops. He doesn't think—he just moves. It's just as he was taught.

He's swiping Chizome's blade from his back holster and darting between the two men before the next drop of rain can even fully slide down his face. He slices up, eyes on the prize, and breathes out just as the first spurt of blood shoots out from the other man's new face wound. In the same breath, he grabs the wrist holding the gun and snaps it to the side, Boost and fear combining to make him stronger than ever before.

The gun flies away, disappearing into the darkness of the alleyway beyond.

When time seems to resume back to its normal pace, Izuku realizes that the other man isn't even attempting to fight back. He's just staring down at Izuku in mild surprise with thick red blood dripping down his forehead and cheek. As Izuku holds his gaze, he sees little strips of skin flying up from behind the man to patch up his wound.

Wicked.

"Is this one yours?" He asks, still staring at Izuku with a funny look.

"No. He's yours." Chizome grabs Izuku by the neck and wrenches him to the side, exposing more of his body to the dim light. "Look at him and memorize the face, Strips, because I'm leaving him to you idiots in this hellhole and not coming back."

Izuku jolts. "Leaving? But you—you said you wouldn't—"

Chizome pushes Izuku forward harshly, taking his katana back smoothly in the same movement. "He'll prove useful to you if you manage to keep him alive."

Izuku stumbles into Strips' chest and immediately moves away from him, his courage from before already long gone, this time replaced with confusion and horror. "What're you—!"

"Why should we do favors for a delusional mass murderer?" Strips challenges, another weapon appearing in his hand. "Especially a favor like this? He can't be more than twelve."

But Chizome isn't scared. He never is, and maybe that's why Izuku always used him as a shield when he was unsure of himself. "This isn't a favor. He

is my first and last invite as a member. But take him or don't; I don't care." Ghostly pupils pierce into his. "If you don't, someone else will. Villains are always looking for successors these days, you buffoon."

When Strips looks back down at Izuku, more intrigued now, the boy swallows, starting to shake for a different reason this time around.

He knows what this place is now. And he should be happy. He should be ecstatic. But he's not. He's terrified, because he's going to be alone for the third time now.

And lonely kids are dead kids.

Izuku takes in a shuddery rush of air, hating the way that Stain can haunt his daily life even while being in Tartarus. "I know. That's why I'm there. I watch all the members now to—to ensure that that doesn't happen—"

"My point was," Yamada interrupts pointedly, nostrils flaring, "you think that the Commission can help you even though they really can't. But that's normal, okay? That's exactly what they want you to think. They wanted to back you into a corner, Midoriya. Don't you see it? Right now, with everything that's happened and with the allegations against Rabbit, you're desperate. You're in a hole. They are relying on that, son, to get you to agree to their uneven, shitty agreement to—"

"It's not shitty if it can actually do some *good*—"

"It's *shitty* because they're just going to use you for things no kid should ever be used for." Yamada says, voice growing steadily louder. "You will be indebted to them forever after this, and you'll be living under constant supervision and scrutiny. That's no way to live, son. You can't possibly say that that's how you want to live your dreams."

Izuku's arms tingle. He's holding them too tightly against himself. "But living in hiding as a vigilante isn't a way to live either."

"Which is why Rabbit should be retired wholly."

A shock goes through him. "No! That's such a waste—"

"You're a hero student, Midoriya. *That* is your path to becoming an influential, *legal* hero."

"But, Yama, that takes time!"

Yamada huffs. “What has got you so worried about this? Why are you so sure that you won’t be given the time to do what you need to do? *Why* do you think you need to be a hero at fifteen? That’s *outrageous,* kiddo.”

Outrageous? Izuku feels his eyes twitch. His arms unfold, and his hands turn into tighter fists. “You wouldn’t get it.”

“That’s why I asked you if you wanted to talk to me, Midoriya. I’d be glad to listen so I can better understand why you—”

“I can’t talk to you,” Izuku retorts, the pressure in his temples building.

“Yes, you can!”

“I really can’t right now, Yama.” There’s a siren blaring in Izuku’s right ear. “I just can’t do it yet or else—”

“Listen, I promise that I’ll—” When Yamada moves forward a little, hand reaching out to rest on Izuku’s shoulder, the boy’s patience dissipates.

“I’m not going to tell you anything, so *just forget it already!”* The words leave him in a yell, and they hurt just to push out of his throat. They’re loud and scratchy and commanding.

“Hey, now, *watch it!”* Yamada snaps back, though his own voice is much more controlled than Izuku’s was. But it does the job, as Izuku immediately recoils, stomach doing flips.

The tense silence between them that follows nearly kills Izuku. The boy squeezes his eyes shut and turns back onto his side, eyes stinging. He gets a striking sense of deja vu and hates himself even more for doing the same thing to two people he cares about. Regret burns like shame all around his body. “I’m sorry,” he starts, his voice slightly muffled from his blanket. He fights to keep the hesitance out of his tone. “I didn’t mean to yell.”

Yamada watches him for a long moment, and Izuku only curls further in on himself. “No, I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have started this.” Yamada stands up. “It’s too late at night for this, and you need to rest. We’ll finish this later, sounds good?”

Yeah, sure. It’s not like Izuku has a shitton of ‘we’ll discuss this later’ conversations coming up, right? It’s not like they always ‘forget’ about

them.

When Yamada tells him goodnight and retreats from the room, Izuku grips his pillow tightly. This is all so *annoying.* It took all of his willpower to not break down right there. He doesn't agree with Yamada, though he does understand where he's coming from.

Adults are just… tiring. Fuck. Is this how it is for adults when they deal with Izuku? He suddenly feels so much worse about himself.

Missy hops onto the bed and flops onto Izuku's legs, biting at his ankles through the comforter, and the boy hisses at her to stop. It seems she's feeling upset tonight too.

Izuku just hopes Yamada won't think of him any differently in the future.

So, maybe he did break a few more rules than he thought. That's a hazard for his line of work, to be fair. This can't be his fault. Not totally.

It's Tuesday, the morning after the lightshow fiasco, as the local news station is already dubbing it, and he's been caught.

Izuku stares at Nezu, arms crossed.

Nezu stares back, stirring his tea. He has that same polite smile on his face, and Izuku detests it. He absolutely loathes it. But he won't break yet.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Nezu prods, still so sickly sweet.

Izuku, who is currently tied to the nice chair in front of Nezu's desk, remains cool and unbothered. "You've got the wrong guy."

"Do I?" Nezu sounds highly amused.

"I wasn't even near the scene of the crime. Even before I went back with Aizawa and Yama, I was minding my own business and doing my

work for my teachers. When would I have possibly had time to do all this?"

Nezu takes a sip from his cup. There's a small scratch on the side of it. "I have a two hour long video compilation I pieced together of you placing each individual light probe at various places around the school's perimeter. You were quite thorough and precise; I admit I was almost impressed."

Izuku narrows his eyes. "That wasn't me. It was a shapeshifter."

The cup is set down with a *clink*. Izuku's personal one sits untouched before him, still steaming. He would be drinking it if he weren't tied up.

"Are you aware that Quiet Hour begins at ten o'clock and ends at five in the morning?"

"I am."

"So you're also aware that violating that national policy by blasting music and flashing obscene images in the middle of the night near a populated area could, in a lot of cases, result in a hefty fine?"

Izuku's courage falters, understanding immediately what he's saying. "How much is it?"

"For an establishment as large as UA, it is a one hundred and thirty thousand yen fine. I received the bill this morning."

Izuku's eyes bug out of his skull, and he coughs. "That's chump change for you, sir."

Nezu puts his paws together, his beady eyes shining. "For me, yes, but not for you. Saying as you are currently unemployed, you will be paying that fine back to me in a different way. Instead of using my little workshop in this very office, you will be doing service work around the school for various teachers. You will—"

"What?" Izuku screeches, leaning forward as far as he can in the restraints without using any of his quirks. "You're banning me from my workshop?"

"My workshop," Nezu corrects pointedly, "and yes. Please do not interrupt me again. As I was saying, this service work could be anything from helping to organize papers and grade them to simply

bringing the teacher a coffee when asked. Think of it as being a teacher's aid, except instead of tending to one teacher, you will be helping all of them whenever needed."

Izuku wilts. "Oh, come on! That's so lame!"

"It is lame. But it is already set in stone."

Izuku whines and goes boneless, letting all of his muscles relax. He slides out of his restraints and down the chair, becoming one with the floor underneath Nezu's desk. "I'm sorry! Is that what you want?"

Nezu isn't buying it. "You weren't sorry then, and you're not sorry now. Do not take me for a fool, Midoriya."

Ugh. Izuku sighs and prepares to take a nap right here on this rug. He's tired, having just accepted his fate. He figures this is better than being grounded again—or worse, getting snitched on to Aizawa or someone.

"Perhaps for future reference," Nezu offers, a wry grin appearing on his features, "don't program your little night lights to show a rendition of me on the toilet for the whole city to see."

Oh, yeah. Izuku figures that's fair.

Izuku has been dreading Wednesday for the entire week. In fact, he's been dreading it ever since he agreed to have this meeting with Hound Dog.

He didn't want to even get out of bed. But All Might just *had* to text him early that morning to remind him what time his appointment was and also to say that he was very proud of him for taking control of his health. The hero said he was ecstatic when he learned Izuku wouldn't back out and would instead actually take the leap.

Which sort of made Izuku feel guilty.

Izuku is about eighty-nine percent certain that All Might only texted him that so he *wouldn't* skip out on it or conveniently 'forget.'

But even still, Izuku couldn't help the happiness that rushed through him upon reading it. It's a different kind of euphoria when your mentor says he's proud.

And then in the car this morning, Aizawa said he'd take Izuku out for ice cream or cake after school, and although he didn't say what for, it's not hard to guess. This *also* made Izuku feel guilty. So, here he is, staring down at his lunch in the cafeteria, trying to come to terms with things.

He's read a lot of books in the past about… *counseling.* He knows what therapy can entail and he knows the difference between psychologists and psychiatrists. Izuku's meeting with Hound Dog today isn't to diagnose anything or to be prescribed any medications, no.

It's just to talk. To get a feel for things. Hound Dog is most likely going to chart out the waters with Izuku and see what's going on.

And Izuku is going to be the unwilling cocaptain.

While Izuku has seen these things before, he's never actually *been* to one. He's never gone to counseling. The closest he's ever had to a session was when that one social worker came by that day to check on him after he was placed with his father way back when—which, obviously, isn't a very good comparison.

He doesn't remember what happened to her.

"Hey, you eatin' today or what?" Kacchan bites, slamming his food down beside Izuku at the table and causing an indignant Uraraka to move away to make space for him.

Izuku wrinkles his nose. "I thought you were eating with Kirishima?"

"Yeah, well, he pissed me the fuck off this morning." Kacchan takes an aggressive bite of his sandwich. "Why do you look like that, nerd?"

Uraraka elbows the blond. "Deku looks fine, Bakugou. You know, if you want to sit at the table you could just *ask* instead of shoving—"

"I don't have to ask for shit!" Kacchan snaps, voice muffled from the food in his mouth. He continues to eat angrily, eyes twitching.

Iida, who was in a very interesting conversation with Todoroki about some rich lotion, whips around to glare at Kacchan. "Bakugou, for the tenth time, that is not how you talk to your—!"

Izuku tunes them all out, letting the ensuing argument become a backdrop to his thoughts.

Maybe he would miss this. Maybe if Izuku did join the Commission somehow, having to leave UA in the process, he would regret it. Because sitting here, in a cafeteria surrounded by mostly nice people and a shit ton of quirks to preoccupy himself with, makes him feel normal. Makes him feel like something other than a kid who's just been leeching off the teachers here at this school since he doesn't have a place to call home anymore.

But maybe that's not quite true either.

Huh. Is this something he should talk to Hound Dog about? How UA makes him feel? The changes he's gone through in just the span of a month? That's a normal thing, right?

Kacchan might know. He saw someone for a good stretch of time a few years back, though to be fair that was more for anger management and emotional control than for anything else. If Izuku asks him what to expect, he'd probably be able to give only a basic rundown.

"Deku!" Uraraka says, pulling Izuku from his mind. The girl is now in front of him at the table, her large hazel eyes staring into his. "Since we have a free period after lunch, d'you wanna go with Momo and I to practice with our quirks at the open gym? Snipe-sensei is gonna be there to watch and help!"

Izuku starts to finally bring his rice to his mouth. "Ah, sorry, I can't. I'd love to go next time, though! Sounds fun."

"Aw, that's okay! I'll let you know if Snipe tells us something *inspirational,"* she promises with a bright grin, knowing that Izuku likes to write down all of the advice he hears from pro heroes.

"You're busy?" Todoroki asks, making Izuku freeze.

"Er, yeah." Izuku's eyes shift away. "I just have an appointment after lunch."

Uraraka tips her head. "An appointment?" She shakes herself immediately after saying this, though, as if realizing she shouldn't pry. "Oh, I hope it goes well!"

"Oh, it'll go well for sure," Kacchan snides from beside Izuku, words

dripping with sarcasm.

Izuku shoots him a look but doesn't defend himself, instead choosing to pack up his lunch and stand up. "I better get there a little early," he explains, reassuring his friends' so they'll stop looking so confused. "I'll see you guys in Hero Studies!"

After saying goodbye, Izuku makes his way out into the hall. It's crowded, as most people are done with lunch already and are enjoying talking with their friends before their own passing period. It's not often they get this kind of break.

Izuku sort of lied; he doesn't want to get to Hound Dog's office early. He has some spare time, so he's going to preoccupy himself.

He makes his way to the west wing of the building and jumps to his little perch high above the rest of the students. He settles down on his ledge, as he doesn't wish to go into the vents today, and pulls out his notebook. The corner his makeshift nest is in is just hidden away from the cameras on all sides. He's in the blindspot, which is partially why he picked this area—the chances of being watched are dramatically lower.

He continues his previous personal research on the newest quirks in his arsenal, trying to find any potential matches on the private Quirk Registry database. He doesn't know the full extent of his emotions quirk or his newer regeneration factor. If he can find a quirk on the database that matches what he's experiencing, he may be able to find the people whose quirks were harvested by All for One and thus learn more about it.

This may also tell Izuku of his father's recent activity.

But this search is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. There are so many generic healing and feeling quirks that it would literally take him years to sort through them all. So, Izuku is also pulling up missing persons reports and criminal activity to see if any of the people with similar quirks have disappeared or are now reportedly quirkless. He can also use this to try and find people who may have *not* registered their quirks.

This cross matching technique is efficient and much easier.

He's not too worried about the healing factor he acquired. It seems to have just added on to the one he already has due to his high metabolism and Boost. What he's more focused on right now is the

emotions power.

Izuku can't seem to figure out how to control it precisely. Sometimes it has a mind of his own! If someone's feelings are at an extreme and they walk past him, Izuku will get hit with those emotions even if he's trying to block them out. It overwhelms him and sometimes even makes him physically ill. He has to find a way to mask it.

What's more, he's been feeling things a lot deeper in general lately. Much more than he ever has. Take his relationships with his friends and teachers for example! He swears he can feel their emotions three times as easily than anyone else's. Their motives and intentions are just *there,* and he doesn't have to dig to look for them.

Could his closeness or familiarity with the person affect how smoothly he can detect their emotions? Can they realize what Izuku is doing?

And if Izuku has a falling out with that person or is upset with them, does that make things harder or worse? Maybe that's why he can't feel a lot of Aizawa's emotions yet. Things are still too rocky between them.

When the bell rings, signaling the start of the free period and the end of lunch, Izuku figures he better head up to the appointment. Hound Dog is located on the second floor and is on the administrative side, so it'll take Izuku five minutes to get there—that is, if he doesn't take his time, which he definitely will.

He shoves his notebook in his hoodie (technically he's supposed to be wearing just his uniform, but nobody has said anything to him yet) and jumps down, scaring a few second years when he lands with a rush of air beside them.

The halls are getting more crowded with each passing minute, and he doesn't think anything of it at first. He just walks along, legs feeling like jelly, as he forces himself to just keep going and not stop, because if he stops, he may not ever make it to the office. And that would disappoint everyone.

He doesn't think anything of the way that all the students' phones around him start to buzz a little faster than normal with notifications. He doesn't think anything of the way they gasp and mutter to themselves in surprise and shock, or how they all group together and form larger clusters. He doesn't care.

Not at first.

Not until he hears it.

“—r those tuning in right now, raw footage of the Hero Killer: Stain’s final fight has just surfaced online, released by an unknown account just minutes ago on four different platforms—”

Izuku’s world tips, and his breath leaves him in one continuous *woosh.* And it’s at this moment right here, upon hearing the sounds of various different news reporters talking about the situation from a bunch of different phones, that Izuku realizes Yamada was right the other night. Of course he was right.

Because here Izuku is, surrounded by hundreds of innocent students that just don’t know what they’re about to see, who have no idea what’s going to come next, with his blood frozen inside his chest and heart.

And Izuku doesn’t think he’s ever felt this cornered.

Chapter End Notes

very sry for pushing the rest of the “footage release” scene to the next chap :(the mic scene got too long so I had to push it

s

cleared

Chapter Notes

happy late Valentine's Day!!!

this is one of my favorite chapters. it's pretty sweet, though i think this one has been the second worst one for me to write somehow! the next chap is the worst yet lmfao. i think y'all will like it a lot, tho, bc things get revealed (for real this time)

(cw: decapitation)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We apologize for the interruption of our regularly scheduled broadcast. We are watching this footage as it's currently being released. Fuhito will take it from here."

Izuku's phone is vibrating so fast in his pocket now that it feels like a miniature nuclear reactor. He doesn't make a move to silence it, though. He's standing in the middle of the hallway, limbs frozen, lips parted.

"You're seeing this too, right?" A student asks, breathless. Her voice is high-pitched.

"No way…" Her friend responds, eyes glued on the phone being shared between them.

The hallway becomes louder and louder as students come out of their classrooms to talk. To Izuku's right, a group of second years are clustering around a business course student who's watching the broadcast on his phone.

The screen is displayed onto the wall as a hologram with a touch of a button, and Izuku finds himself turning to face it as more students push past him to see it.

There's a round of shushing and demands to be quiet, and then the sound of the news reporter is amplified throughout the near silent hall.

A man with half of a ram's horn on his head appears on screen, clutching a stack of papers tightly in hand. *"Viewer discretion is*

advised, as what may come next could be disturbing for some audiences…"

There's a ringing in Izuku's ears now. It blocks out all of the other noises around him, narrowing his vision so it's all just one tunnel. Izuku can only look forward, up at that screen, and hear what's being shown. *Danger,* something screams inside of him, something innate and deep and wild. *Danger, danger. Move.*

The screen changes, and a staticky video starts to play. At first, it's all smoky and blurry, but after a second there's a flash of red and orange —an explosion, and everything comes into focus.

The camera seems to be positioned on the side of a building, and the view is crooked. It looks down on an alleyway and a junction to a cracked road. In the distance, fighting and screaming can be heard, and the crackling of flames grows closer to the source of the video.

Audio. There's *audio.*

Panic, so hot and fresh and blinding, runs through him like an electric shock, nearly making him fall. No. No, this can't be possible. He thought he was *good.* He thought he checked for cameras all around the perimeter during the fight with Stain! He thought he covered himself! Granted, he was sort of in a bad state and was high off of fear and adrenaline and desperation, but still!

Izuku doesn't believe it. He can't believe it.

In fact, he's fully convinced that this is some sort of edited or fake 'leak' until he sees sparks of red lightning zipping from the left side of the video to the middle like a shooting star.

His lightning.

A lump crawls up Izuku's throat, choking him. *Rabbit has arrived.*

The audio on the video is turned up, and the shouting of insults is heard more clearly now.

He stares at the hologram, and he can't feel, he can't think, he can't function.

Oh, *God.*

The streetlamp off to the side flickers and burns even brighter, casting orange light over the area and revealing the fight that's just started.

Rabbit is facing Stain directly now, trying to redirect one of his blows. Native and Iida are off to the side on opposite ends, unmoving. The vigilante is the only one up, the only one fighting against the hero killer. He's being pushed back slowly from the sheer force of Stain's blades against his steaming pipe. Izuku remembers how hot it was to the touch. He remembers the way the skin on his palm broke and then bled with how tightly he was holding onto the burning metal.

When Rabbit is pushed closer to where Iida is paralyzed off to the side, Stain's katana quickly comes down, straight for Iida's neck, but Rabbit gets a foot up under him and kicks him away just in time. Iida goes skidding away, out into the road, and Izuku hears the students around him gasp.

"That looks like—"

"Is that—!"

"He's from the hero course!"

The building on the video shakes and causes the camera to vibrate. Cracked glass falls from somewhere above and shines in the light.

"Bastard! Don't touch him!" Rabbit shouts on the video, making the students quiet down. Izuku takes an instinctive step back, not wanting to see this. He already lived through it once, and even more than that in his dreams, so he doesn't need to *watch*.

He doesn't want *anyone* to watch.

Rabbit is in the air in a flash, aiming to hit Stain's head from above, but Stain sends him back with a nasty kick.

Everything that follows is fast. Izuku can barely track what happens with his eyes—the only reason he can is because he *did* it all.

He doesn't remember it being like this, though. He doesn't remember it being this fast. He remembers his clock ticking down, he remembers having to predict Stain's every move whilst paying attention to Iida and Native at the same time to ensure they wouldn't be harmed.

But it was all so still to him. It was all slow. Each moment and action took its time to ingrain itself in his mind.

He didn't ever think that this is what the fight looked like to everyone else.

Iida. Where is he right now? He—he's probably seeing this too. He needs to get out of here. Izuku needs to—

Izuku heart constricts when the camera wrenches free from the mount on the building and drops to the floor, rolling closer to the scene. It's cracked now, and condensation forms on the lens, but it dissipates quickly enough—just in time for the world to see Rabbit's hand shoot behind him to pull the bloody dagger that went right past him back to him.

All without touch.

Izuku's eyes fly open, and before he knows it his back is hitting the glass windows behind him at UA. Pull. He used Pull. And the entire world saw it.

It's online. It will never be erased. His teachers will see it. All Might will see it. His—his *mother*—

Rabbit has one of Stain's katanas in hand now and also his pipe, getting into a more defensive position in front of Iida. His mouth moves, but the sound cuts in and out like a broken record.

Izuku isn't naive enough to think it'll stay that way though.

Rabbit throws a few light bombs towards Stain, but it's not good enough. Soon, Stain is slicing down at him, tongue flicking out. The vigilante's arms come up, and Izuku knows what happens next, but he can't look away.

Deflect shimmers into life and saves him just in time, and sparks fly off of Stain's blade.

"How is he doing that?" Another student asks, and others voice their own confusion and theories. They're quickly shushed, though, because then Rabbit is cracking his knee against Stain's face, and fingers are flying past the camera.

Oh, yeah. Izuku did cut them off.

Someone gags and turns away, and a few students quickly walk the other direction, leaving the video behind.

Izuku should too. He should be following them. But the more he tries, the more he realizes that he just can't.

In the fight, there's a brief pause. A tense silence between all four people in the clearing.

Stain lifts his hand to look at his missing fingers, and dark blood drips down his wrist and onto the floor. Rabbit stares and then takes a few steps back, stumbling. The fear is palpable even through the video. None of the students are speaking now—they're all wide-eyed and quiet. They must feel the danger too.

Sometimes, it's easy for Izuku to forget what kind of person Stain is. It's easy for someone like Izuku, who has trained alongside the Hero Killer before and even fought with him more than once, to forget the influence the man has over other people.

Stain is a living nightmare, and the people watching this video, even knowing that Stain is locked up now and knowing that they're safe from him, are terrified.

The fear that erupts inside this school is so strong that it's all Izuku can focus on. On all floors, on all areas of the building—fear is there. And it's all consuming. Izuku tries to shut out that quirk of his, but he can't.

No one can track Stain's next movements. In one second, Rabbit is sent flying into a window across the road, almost outside the view of the camera. Rabbit crumples to the ground, resembling that of a crushed soda can.

There's another explosion in the distance, and the earth trembles and cracks more of the asphalt, causing the camera to roll even closer.

"No. No. No, no, no." Rabbit's hoarse voice pierces Izuku's own ears. *"How! How did you…"*

Stain is upon him, about to put him down, and students put their hands to their mouths as they watch.

But then there's fire, and Rabbit is spared.

Todoroki. Todoroki needs to leave school too. People will surely recognize him. They will of *course* recognize the son of the number two hero. They're going to crowd him, they're going to stare and whisper and—

Rabbit joins in, the paralyzation having worn off. The fire user and vigilante fight together, shouting instructions at each other. But then

Todoroki slips up while fighting off Stain, and Izuku isn't close enough to help him. So it's just in the nick of time that Iida is finally up and ready to help defend.

Stain is becoming increasingly annoyed and fanatic. He starts to spew about his view on hero society, reciting the same words he would repeat to Izuku every time he saw him. He then points at Rabbit, eyes crazed. *"You are worthy to lead, too, Rabbit. Which is why it will pang me to cut you down."*

Izuku can't process the battle that happens next. With all three of the boys now working together and combining their power, it seems the tides have turned. Hope blooms in the air around Izuku, breaking through the fear.

It happens quickly, the way the final blows land at the same time on Stain, rendering him unconscious. His face is completely smashed in—Izuku can't even recognize it. He has to turn away from the video for a moment, willing himself to move and run away from here. He needs a second, *just* a second, to refocus.

Rabbit stumbles against the window of the crumbling building and falls hard. Todoroki follows him, helping him to sit up. Izuku is grateful they're both far enough away from the camera for their voices to not be picked up. That would've introduced an even bigger nightmare.

A student with long pink hair breathes a sigh of relief. "They beat him!"

"Of course they did. He's in jail, isn't he?" Another responds.

"Still!" A general studies kid elbows the last one. "It was impressive, right? That was scary."

The business course student from before laughs shakily. "I would've shit myself, honestly."

A chorus of agreements rise up.

"Oh, yeah. I would've passed out for sure," someone off to the side chirps.

Izuku's face screws up. He can't celebrate the win like they are. He can't. Because he knows what happens next.

And as heroes in training, Todoroki and Iida couldn't sit and wallow. They just had to fight. They had to keep going. There was no option to pass out or flee or get too scared to move. If either of them did that, if Izuku did that…

"Hey!" Kan's voice comes from the end of the hallway. The Blood Hero is walking swiftly through the crowds of students, his voice severe. His quirk, which is usually an annoyance at the back of Izuku's skull, is surprisingly welcome. "Turn that thing off and get to class! All of you!"

"It's a passing period!" Someone to the right of Izuku argues.

Vlad shakes his head and continues stalking down the hall, voice commanding. "I don't care! Everyone—to your homeroom. *Now."*

"Why do we have to—"

Izuku doesn't pay attention to the argument that starts. He knows why Kan is telling everyone to go to class. He figures in a moment or two, an announcement will be made for everyone to go back to their classroom so everything can be controlled better. If the fear that Izuku feels oozing out of the cracks in UA's building says anything, *everyone* is seeing this.

The earth shakes onscreen.

Once. Twice. And then a third time. It's like in those old dinosaurs movies where the T-Rex starts to walk towards the characters.

The camera at first doesn't pick up on the large, black figure moving through the wall of fire in the distance. But then the first large wing pokes out, and then the next, and then the creature partially residing inside Izuku right now is exposed to the world's eye.

The students stop their arguing at once as they all turn to the screen, mouths dropped open. The Nomu's wings stretch out at an incredible span, showcasing long, curved talons stained with blood. Its eyes are shiny and scarily humanlike, with pupils so dilated that they look almost entirely black.

But since there are no eyelids, the feeling of being watched is there. And it's strong, even on the other side of a screen.

The business course kid from before shakes himself. "What is that?"

“What the hell…”

“Is that like the thing they said was at the USJ?”

Even Kan for a moment is quiet, his attention having been diverted to the absolutely monstrosity that is the ten-foot tall Nomu with an even longer set of wings.

Rabbit’s head lifts up, and in the same split second, the Nomu beats its wings once, and it’s right in front of both of them: Native and Rabbit.

The crowd in front of Izuku flinches back, but the worst has yet to come. Kan moves forward quickly, as if being reminded of this fact.

Only Kan and other pro heroes have read the more detailed reports that were kept from the public. Besides Izuku, Kan is the only one in this room who seems to have put the pieces of what will happen together.

Kan pushes his way through the students, trying to get to the largest hologram screen he can find, but he’s too late.

Native is the first to react; he jumps in front of Rabbit, and Izuku knows what comes next of course, but his stomach still drops when he sees the large black hands of the Nomu shooting out and wrapping around the neck and head of the hero.

It happens faster than even Izuku remembers.

Tendons snap, and the head is popped off with one easy yank.

It’s horrendously loud on the video. Sickening. The vertebrae disconnect like pop rocks, and there’s a gut wrenching *squelch* as the flesh of the neck tears apart from the head. Blood spurts across the clearing, staining the ground, and *God,* the sound that Native’s head makes when it drops onto the ground…

The students cry out around Izuku, and the crowds shuffle around. Someone gags at the same time that Todoroki throws up on video.

Izuku stares, unseeing.

People curse, stumbling away again. Native’s body is dropped, and Rabbit crawls forward with slow movements to cradle the head, moving to connect it back to the socket. Where it should be.

Kan finally manages to snatch the phone, breaking off the hologram,

but it doesn't matter, because the footage goes black anyway and is rewound as a newscaster speaks over it.

Izuku takes a step away from the window and turns, heading away from the crowds. He takes another, then another.

And he can't breathe again. There's a low ringing in his ears and a cold sensation making a home just beneath his skin. He smells the fire from that night. He can feel the soot clogging up his pores and the ash flying into his nose.

For a moment, it's like he's there again.

Izuku's nails dig into his skin as he spirals. He feels something wet on his skin. It's sweat, his mind supplies, but he doesn't believe it.

No. It can't be that. It's not sweat. It's something warmer. Thicker. It's blood. Native's blood is all over him, soaking him through to the bone and blotting out the colors of his clothes.

Izuku's hands are a dark red again, and he hates that he ever thought they could get clean.

His gut is coiled tight, and Kan seems to spot him amidst his giving commands. The blood hero reaches for him, trying to grab his arm, but a student throws up and he's occupied again.

So Izuku slips away before he loses the will to.

Shouta coughs and grabs his cup of coffee. It's cold by now, but he doesn't care. He thinks he's coming down with something, as his throat has been scratchy all morning. Plus, he has a nagging migraine that just won't go away.

It doesn't help that Hizashi decided to wear his new citrus scented '*Presents from Mic'* perfume today. That's only aided in making Shouta's head hurt even more.

It's not that he doesn't like the scent. It's just that it's a little too strong. Hizashi's team made two versions of it, as most perfume

companies do: eau de cologne, and eau de parfum. Today, it's obvious Hizashi wore the eau de parfum one. It's way more intense.

As Shouta works on fixing some of his lecture notes and adding onto it, his migraine only worsens. There's a deep pressure against his temples, too, and it's making his eyes itch terribly. He reaches for his eye drops and squeezes a few of them in, but that doesn't help much.

For some reason, a sense of foreboding begins to coil deep within his stomach.

He has the teacher's lounge to himself for the moment, as the other faculty members are either getting their own lunch from the cafeteria or helping the kids at various gyms or music rooms. It's supposed to be a calmer day, with the teachers being given some liberty in deciding what they want to do with their students during free period, if anything at all. For Shouta? Well, he decided to let his own class do whatever they wanted, as most of the others have.

Usually he enjoys the quiet. But now he can only hear the ticking of the clocks in the room and the sound of his chair rolling against the grooves of the tile every so often.

And is it just him or is it getting hot in here? Did someone change the temperature or something? He can't stand the heat. He can't focus very well if he's sweating. Granted, he's not the biggest fan of the cold, either, but he'd rather be cold than hot.

Being hot just makes things messy. It's easy to warm yourself up if you're cold, but it's not so easy to cool off if you're hot.

Because Shouta is feeling a little warm, it's getting harder to breathe. He coughs, his throat suddenly becoming dry. He reaches for a bottle of water, suspicious now. What's going on?

Alongside the foreboding comes faint panic. It seeps through the cracks in the floors and travels up his legs, spreading to his body. It's weird, really, how it seems foreign to him.

It doesn't feel like *his* panic, so to speak, and yet he's feeling it all the same.

Just when Shouta is about to call it quits on his work because of his annoyance and curiosity, Nemuri walks through the door, the clacks of her heels striking against the tile sounding purposeful.

“Did you see the news?” She asks, all business.

Shouta senses the seriousness and spins to face her in his chair. “No. What’s up?”

Instead of responding, Nemuri simply shoves her phone in Shouta’s face and taps *play* on a video. Very quickly on, Shouta can see that it’s a replay of a news broadcast. The time shown was only a minute ago.

A headline flashes on screen, and Shouta’s brows fly up.

Shocking footage of Pro Hero Native’s final moments emerges!

That’s when Shouta’s unexplained panic makes sense in the worst way possible.

“They’re all listening to it,” Nemuri says, voice clipped. “All the students out there. Kan and I were trying to get them all to stop but it’s just not gonna happen.”

Shit. If this video is on the news already, that means everyone must have seen it by now. Not just the students at this school, either. *Everyone.*

He stands up, already moving towards the door with Nemuri following closely behind. “Where are the kids?”

She doesn’t need to ask who he’s talking about. “Snipe brought Iida and Todoroki to Nezu’s office so they wouldn’t be ogled by any students. Their families have already been contacted to pick them up directly if possible.”

That’s one good thing, at least, Shouta guesses. “And where is *he?”*

Nemuri shakes her head, eyes glistening. “That’s what I was going to ask you.”

This time, the sense of dread Shouta feels is completely his own. “You can’t find him?”

“Hizashi is looking, and so is Yagi, but he’s just gone, Sho. You know how slippery he can be. Hell, at this point he knows the ins and outs of this school better than any of us do.”

He’s going to run, Shouta thinks abruptly, fear making him walk faster. “He’s going to leave. I just know it.”

“I don’t think he will,” Nemuri assures. “Maybe before he would’ve, but right now I think even he knows it’s safer with us. He’s in school somewhere. His tracker says he’s here, but he doesn’t have the location set as specific. If I have to take a guess, he’s someplace where he can be alone for a sec with no one to bother him.”

Shouta uncurls his fists, relieved, and changes his course to head to Nezu’s office. Just as he does this, the speakers above ding to signify the beginning of an announcement. The Principal’s voice nearly takes Shouta off guard.

“All students should immediately return to their homeroom class and wait for further instruction. Thank you for your speedy cooperation!”

“He’s not taking any chances, is he?” Nemuri remarks.

Shouta walks past a few students and barks at them to turn off the phone they’re huddling around and get a move on before replying. “Well, everybody and their mothers are probably seeing that video right now, so he’s just being careful. This is a big deal that extends past politics.”

“Most people with a brain already figured Rabbit was innocent.”

“I’m not just talking about him. Most citizens, especially outside of Japan, haven’t seen what a Nomu is truly like. The Commission has been trying to scrub all pictures and info of them off the web since the USJ. This is just putting gasoline on the fire.”

Nemuri sucks in her teeth. “The world’s gonna get to see just how powerful these monsters are. This is going to cause even more of a problem.” She tips her head, her words dipping lower. “Which will be great for Rabbit, though. The people will gravitate more towards him for safety. They’re gonna look to him for hope. Did you hear what Stain said about him on that footage?”

Shouta shakes his head, quickening his pace. They’re almost there. Once he arrives at the office, he can pester Nezu to tell him exactly where the kid is, as he’s sure the mammal has already scoured all the cameras for him. “I don’t care what Stain had to say about him. I’m more worried about making sure this won’t bite any of us in the ass.”

Nemuri chuckles, but it’s clearly humorless.

Shouta wonders if she’s feeling sick to her stomach too.

She is seated with her legs to her chest on her couch. Her limbs are stiff.

Her apartment is dark except for the red lights of her kitchen appliances behind her and the television she's seated in front of. The colors wash over her, illuminating her features in the otherwise dim room.

She always makes sure she has blackout curtains wherever she moves. It's a must. In fact, it's usually the first thing she always buys. Inko just likes to be in darker areas when she's feeling at her lowest.

Like right now.

She sits there, barely breathing, and replays the footage of the newscaster stumbling over the events happening on screen.

She's on the eleventh rewatch, and it doesn't get any easier to see. She can recall every single detail now without looking.

The fight. The villain finally being taken down. The moments before the creature arrived.

And then another branch of death making itself known.

She's frowning, not quite understanding why this happened. She heard about Hosu, of course. She heard about many people dying, including Pro Hero Native, and she knew what they were accusing her son—er, Rabbit of. So she had already imagined many times over—during sleep, during work, during her walks—the different ways that the fight had possibly panned out. But she still didn't think it would be like this.

Inko wanted to be angry at first. Any mother would be, right? She knew, deep down, just from their *connection,* that her son had never done anything like what they were blaming him for. Every time she rewatched footage of him, every time she saw Rabbit's name on a headline, she would get this… feeling. This twinge.

It's difficult to explain, but somehow Inko just *feels* him now.

It's almost as if he's right there beside her at every waking moment of the day. And Inko can't help but wonder if that's even real, or if that's just another thing she *wants* to feel.

Like how she wanted to feel that anger. She wanted to be angry at them for how they treated Rabbit. She wanted to feel offended on his behalf, because why in the world would they not believe in him after everything he's done for them? But Inko just didn't have it in her to hate the people for that.

Why would she? She was just the same back then.

She doesn't realize she's crying until the first tear drips onto her knees through her leggings. Though her vision is blurry, she watches still. The news station, for the twelfth time, cuts away from the video right before Native's head is pulled clean off.

Inko has seen it enough times uncut to imagine it even without having to see it, however.

Eventually, she forces herself to tear her eyes away. She thinks of those other poor kids who were there. She recalls the sound of the pro hero being ripped apart. She hears the boys' desperate cries. It's enough to make any parent falter.

And she thinks back to her own poor kid.

She wishes more than anything she could be there right now to hold him. She hopes he can sense her all around him just as she can sense him all around her. Would he take comfort in that? Inko hopes so, but even she is not naive enough to count on it.

She wants to see him. But she can't.

That's real, right? That's not fake. She truly can't see him. This isn't because she is afraid to. She simply doesn't want to intrude on his life if he doesn't want her to be a part of it.

Perhaps she can wait until he's better. Until they're both better. Only then will she find him.

She prays it won't be a mistake.

Izuku is in the very high rafters of the secluded gym nobody uses.

It's a gym specifically for teachers. It's supposed to be for the heroic course instructors, more specifically, to test out their lessons or new scenarios privately before their classes. In fact, that's why there is such high tech just lying around.

This is the gym Aizawa and Shinsou go to sometimes, if Izuku remembers correctly, but even then that's rare.

Despite its barrenness, the gym is completely spotless. The air is clean and smells faintly of cleaning supplies, and the walls are freshly painted.

It's a beige color. Izuku figures that's better than off-white.

He found this place not too long ago. In the schematics he uncovered of UA, found in Nezu's office cabinet, this area is labeled as a work in progress training gym. So, it's logical to assume that even Nezu has forgotten about this area.

It's just another example of UA's absolute wealth. They built this entire region for what? Just to be unused for weeks on end.

The good thing about that, however, is that Nezu hasn't installed a ton of cameras here yet. There's only three, which means there are bound to be places that the cameras can't capture. There are blind spots.

Izuku is in one of those.

There's a little crook in the corner of the high ceiling. A little alcove where an AC unit or ventilation system could fit. But as it stands, there isn't one. The only thing in this hole in the wall is a few long lost supplies and balls, probably from training days gone wrong.

And then Izuku, of course.

His back is against one of the beige walls, and he has his feet up against the other side. It's pretty small up here, but he's not claustrophobic. He prefers a smaller area to be in when he's trying to

think. Surprisingly, though, he hasn't done a lot of thinking.

You're pretty high up, Shimura notes.

Her voice isn't in his head anymore. She sounds like she's right beside him. Izuku's eyes are closed, but he bets that if he opened them he would see her ghostly form floating there.

"I like feeling high," he answers, only to realize how wrong that sounds afterwards. Shimura doesn't take it that way, though.

I do too.

He holds his arms tighter across his stomach. "How high up did you go with your quirk?" He asks, his words soft. "When you were… alive, I mean."

She hums. The feeling of her quirk moves so she's right there in front of him somehow. *As high as I could go without losing my breath. Gran never liked it that high up, but he would follow me up there anyway.*

"Did you take All Might that high?"

Nah. He was a scaredy cat too back then. He wouldn't let go of Gran until we got back below the clouds.

Izuku smiles a little. The image of a young, terrified All Might clutching onto an annoyed and equally as terrified Gran Torino thousands of feet above the ground makes him laugh.

He opens his eyes and turns to her, about to ask her something else, but finds that she's not there anymore. Her presence is gone, back to being confined in the depths of his mind.

He figures out why a few moments later.

Vlad King's quirk signature pings, telling Izuku he's approaching. The man opens the double doors to the gym and walks inside, looking at his phone. He stops in the middle of the mats and glances around.

He's grumbling something low, but Izuku is so high up that he can't tell what he's saying, even with his enhancements.

Izuku figures he's been alone for long enough, saying as it's been around an hour since he hid himself away, so he reluctantly picks up one of the weighted softballs and aims it at the man.

With a superpowered flick of his wrist, the ball shoots towards the hero's head, whistling through the air. Kan's neck snaps to the side at the sound, and blood immediately spurts from his tubes and hardens, creating a shield just in time to stop the ball from hitting him. The man scoffs as the ball drops to the ground before him, harmless, and he quickly finds where the throw came from.

"We were looking for ya, you rat," he says loudly, his voice traveling up to Izuku's ears. His blood arcs back inside of him as he crosses his burly arms and glares up at Izuku. "You know that, right?"

Izuku hangs his legs over the side of the wall, not answering. His face screws up, and he squints down at the pro hero.

"You've gotta come down from there," Kan tells him. "This area is off limits to you."

Now, Izuku wants to speak. He truly does. But all of a sudden it's as if he's lost his voice entirely. There's something heavy lodged in his throat, and he fears that if he opens his mouth, he just might start spilling things he shouldn't.

Izuku averts his gaze away from him, opting to stare at his knees again.

There's a beat of silence. Izuku wishes that Kan's emotions were as easy to read as everyone else's. He'd kill to know what he was thinking.

"C'mon," Kan continues after ten seconds of nothing. He sounds uncharacteristically neutral. Almost, dare Izuku say, soft. It makes his bad arm tingle. "I'll get Aizawa if you don't move your ass."

Is Kan feeling bad for Izuku? The boy hopes not. The last person he would want thinking of him as weak is Vlad King. He knows Kan must have seen the footage (hell, he'd be more surprised if there was someone who hadn't at least heard of it by now), but Izuku isn't sure that that would be enough to change how Vlad thinks of him.

He wouldn't want it to be, honestly.

"I'll call All Might, then," Kan threatens.

Izuku only sniffs, forcing himself to find his voice to focus on what matters now. "Are Iida and Todoroki okay?"

He can't see Kan's face, as he's still resolutely not looking at his teacher, but he still feels some type of shift in his demeanor. A little crack—a break. Kan's quirk shifts around. "They were released before the rest of the student body was. It's safer that way."

"They're gonna be swamped with reporters for months," Izuku whispers.

Kan sighs, and it's loud enough for Izuku to hear it. "I bet they will," he says darkly before straightening up even more. "But they'll be alright. They're pretty strong kids, all things considerin'."

In the next second, more blood shoots from Kan's back and allows him to fly upward, towards Izuku. Izuku feels his body heat up when Kan hovers with his cycling blood a few feet away from him, studying him.

Izuku finally glances at him, wondering why he's even bothering with this. Why is he being so soft? Why is he continuing with this? Any other time and he's sure that Kan would've already dragged him down from his hiding spot kicking and screaming. So what's this all about?

It bothers Izuku that the change is there. He's never certain of himself when the adults around him change. Why is Kan changing? Why is he dealing with Izuku? In fact, why do any of them? Izuku's growing sense of emptiness is well deserved, is it not? Why can't they just let him be?

Kan holds out a large hand in invitation, bringing him from his thoughts, and Izuku drops his gaze to stare at it, perturbed. But then he retreats further back inside his alcove and finds himself burying his face in his knees again, cheeks red. "I'm sorry," he says, and not even he knows why he let that slip.

Vlad King grunts and drops the hand, jaw clenching. "If that's not an apology for wasting my time, I don't wanna hear it."

"It's for Native." Izuku squeezes his eyes shut even tighter. "For what I did to him."

"You didn't do anything to that man."

Izuku hums negatively. "Did you see the footage?"

"I did."

“Then you know that’s not true.”

The stillness that stretches between them should be uncomfortable, but it’s not, weirdly enough. Izuku grips himself tightly as the world spirals out of control. He wills himself to focus on his breathing. This has happened so many times now that he knows when he’s on the verge of having one of his quiet meltdowns. In those instances, it’s best to do some breathing exercises to not make it worse. As he counts the steps in his mind, colors flash behind his eyelids.

He sees dolls and heads and arcs of red, and he finds he doesn’t like red anymore. Why did he ever?

Box method. In for four. Hold for four.

Kacchan’s eyes are red. Izuku thinks that maybe that could’ve started it.

Out for four. Hold for four.

Aizawa’s Erasure has a red glint to it. There’s that, too.

Start over. In for four. Hold for four.

Todoroki’s face pops into the forefront of Izuku’s brain. His fire is red, and so is his scar. Maybe, just maybe, Izuku can still like the color red after all.

Out for four. Hold for four.

When he comes back to the world, albeit slowly, Kan isn’t there anymore. But there’s another person entering, and Izuku honestly shouldn’t be surprised. Kan’s threats are always real. He never bluffs.

All Might grins up at Izuku in his deflated form, his bony hands on his hips. “Almost didn’t see you up there,” Yagi calls. “What a hiding spot!”

Izuku wouldn’t exactly call it a hiding spot anymore, as everyone knows now where it is, but that’s okay.

Yagi beckons him down. “Come on, my boy! The rest of the school has already been released.”

Something inside Izuku forces him to obey. His body starts moving seemingly on its own accord, and in just a second he’s landing on the floor right beside Yagi, his ankles burning just a bit. His teacher beams

at him, and the corners of his eyes crinkle softly as he smiles even wider.

“Impressive!” Yagi says, but Izuku isn’t interested in the praise today.

“I swear I was actually going to the appointment,” is the first thing he says, which, okay, probably doesn’t make much sense since he just blurted it out with no context.

Yagi blinks. “Huh?”

“My… my thing with Hound Dog,” Izuku explains. “I was actually gonna go.”

“Ah!” Yagi tips his head and pats Izuku on the back twice. “I know, young man. Some things just happen, and that’s alright. Nothing detrimental has changed from then to now.”

Nothing detrimental? No, Izuku doesn’t understand. He saw the video, right? Of course he did. So he must have seen the powers Izuku was using, surely? There’s no way he didn’t notice! And yet, despite all of that, despite all of the implications with that, he’s still being so… nice. Just as always. He’s always been that steady figure.

It’s the same thing with Vlad! Kan was kinder than ever before, which is saying something.

It doesn’t make sense. When is the hammer going to drop? He just doesn’t get it. It makes him feel weird again. It makes him feel… more vulnerable. Weaker. Just as Yamada said.

It’s only when Izuku begins to shake slightly that All Might brings him from his thoughts by hooking an arm around him and steering him out of the gym. “You did great. You know that, yes?”

Izuku looks up, eyes shiny. Yagi’s voice was so soft that he almost didn’t hear him.

Yagi clears his throat. “The hardest thing to learn as a hero is that we can’t help everyone. Native saved all three of you boys, and he saved so many more from grief. Did I not say this already?” His words turn more grave. “You must not feel bad for his sacrifice. You fought harder than most heroes ever could, and that’s more than I could’ve asked of you.”

Izuku takes All Might’s sentences in like oxygen, swallowing them

down like he'll never get another breath. He frowns as his brain tries to make sense of them.

With the comforting feeling of his master walking next to him, Izuku thinks that this time around it's easier to believe those words.

They don't say a word to him about the footage. None of them do as Izuku follows behind All Might and enters the lounge.

Some of the teachers have left already, but there's a few stragglers. Apparently Nezu is allowing the staff a half day, which is great for both them and Izuku.

Izuku elects to sit on the couch while he waits for Aizawa and Yamada to be done with their work. They told him they have only about an hour left, and after that they can go.

They don't talk to him much throughout the hour, but he does move around a lot, and it's not that they ignore him—far from it. When someone gets up to go to the copy machine or the coffee area, they move around him casually, giving him light touches either to the shoulder or head. Almost like they're just reminding him that he's indeed there and that they see him.

There's something stuffy in the air, however. At this point, Izuku isn't sure if it's just him or not.

When they leave, the hallways are eerie and silent. It's still early in the school day, so seeing everything so empty feels weird.

Yamada insists on stopping at the grocery store for some household supplies really fast, but after that, they make it home and Izuku locks himself away in the guest room. He has nothing against his teachers, it's just that he's still trying to navigate his own thoughts and feelings and stamp out this God awful feeling camping in his chest.

He's still confused on why no one has given him the reaction he deserves yet. He thought—he was so sure—that he'd have something a little harsher in store. It's only logical, right? That would be the next

step to any sane person.

But during the hours Izuku stays holed up in the room, scrolling on his phone and busying himself with stupid essays he's doing in English for extra credit, no one comes bursting in to interrogate him. Detective Tsukauchi doesn't appear next to him with his notepad and his all knowing quirk, ready to force the truth out of him.

It's just Izuku and the window and the cats who choose to come and go through the crack between the door and the wall.

Izuku wants this to be a good sign, but he can't be so sure. When his essays are too agonizing to read through again, he checks his notes to see if he can add anything on Overhaul. He's getting close to a breakthrough, he can just feel it. Soon, he's going to get some information that can really help him help *her*.

He needs it to be much sooner though. For everyone's sake.

Dinner is being cooked, but Izuku isn't hungry, so he politely opts out of coming out of the depths of his cave for their group meal. He apologizes to Yamada, saying that he's just not feeling well, which, honestly, isn't too bad of a lie. It's barely *even* a lie! He really isn't feeling the greatest.

But he begins to regret not joining them around ten minutes later, as his absence seems to create more problems than it does solve.

He hates it when his teachers argue. It doesn't happen too often, but when it does, it stings Izuku.

He's under the bed, curled up in a tight ball with his phone on the carpet in front of his face. It lights up every so often with notifications from the Class 1-A group chat—it's still blowing up from earlier today. Izuku finally unmuted them, needing something else to focus on.

Iida and Todoroki haven't responded to any of the texts, and neither has Izuku. People have been texting him to ask if his two friends are alright and if he's heard from them, but he doesn't know what to say. And, truthfully, it's not his place, is it? He's not supposed to say anything on their behalf. Give it a day, Izuku thinks, and maybe Iida and Todoroki will be able to respond to their concerns with their own thoughts.

Aizawa and Yamada's arguing grows a little louder, but Izuku can't be too annoyed by it. If it weren't for his enhancements he wouldn't be

hearing it at all, so why is he complaining? Couples are allowed to argue. Pro heroes are allowed to argue.

"Are you even hearing yourself?" Aizawa hisses at his husband, his voice low. *"Do you know what Naomasa just proposed? Do you know what that would do to him? All that progress?"*

"You're not being rational," Yamada snaps back. *"We need to think about this, Shouta. Really think about this."*

"Really? I'm not being rational? Since when did we start switching arguments?"

Izuku listens to them with a growing heaviness in his limbs until Yamada's quirk signature abruptly storms down the hallway and into his office. The door shuts—it's not a soft shut by any means, but it's also not hard enough to be classified as a slam. Still, it makes Izuku wince.

Curse his overly sensitive hearing. Maybe he could benefit by getting his old Rabbit ring back for the quirk suppressant it had built into it.

Izuku waits for a few more minutes, watching the battery life on his phone slowly go down while he reads everyone's messages. Then he wipes his face and pushes himself out from under the bed. His socked feet pad across the floor, and he opens his door only a little bit more to peek through first. The office is shut, as expected, but the light is on, telling Izuku that Yamada is working.

Psyching himself up, he walks down the hallway with Pickles in tow and pauses at the mouth of it, his Edgeshot-themed long sleeve nightshirt suddenly making him feel self conscious despite having already been seen in it many times before.

Aizawa is at the dinner table, quietly finishing his food.

He has a small bottle open next to him. It's one of those miniature fireball bottles found for cheap at most convenience stores. Izuku notes that there's only a few sips taken from it. Besides that, it's nearly full. He wonders when he started drinking whiskey. Izuku's never seen it around the house, though to be fair there's zero alcohol around here at any given time for other reasons.

Two other plates are set out, one on either side of him. Both seats, however, are empty.

And seeing Aizawa like this, quiet and alone and out of place, does something to Izuku. The boy rubs his arms and then takes a deep breath before grabbing one of the plates off the table and walking to the kitchen. Stewed chicken and rice is being kept warm on the stove, and it smells heavenly. Izuku scoops some onto his plate and slowly walks back around to sit down beside his teacher, who glances up at him with an unreadable expression.

“Changed your mind?” He asks, nonjudgmental.

Izuku shrugs, not looking at him. “It smelled good.”

This earns him a small smile. Aizawa continues to eat, taking some salad from the bowl in the middle of the table from time to time. “It’s my mother’s recipe.”

“Can I have it?” Izuku asks without thinking, eager, but Aizawa isn’t offended.

“I don’t care. Mic keeps most of our families’ recipes combined in the book in the kitchen.”

Izuku takes a bite of rice, satisfied. He could make this for Kacchan one day in the future. It might be nice.

A quiet, comfortable silence ensues between them. One of the cats tries to claw up his leg, but Izuku shoos them away. He knows they’ve already had their dinner and definitely don’t need this.

Aizawa sees Izuku looking at the bottle of whiskey every so often, as he raises his brow a few minutes into the stillness. “What, more of a vodka kind of person?”

Izuku’s eyes widen, but there’s a knowing look to the man’s gaze that tells the boy he shouldn’t bother lying or dancing around what’s being truly said. Izuku swallows, shame washing over him, and counts the prongs he sees on his fork. “I don’t do that anymore,” he settles on, thinking of hidden drawers in his old room.

“Yeah, that’s what I said too a few years ago.”

A weight drops in Izuku’s stomach. He doesn’t know how to respond to that, if there even is anything he can say in response, but it doesn’t seem to matter, as Aizawa breathes out deeply in a sigh.

“I shouldn’t have brought that up, but…” Aizawa pauses and wipes a

hand down his face, seeming to try to find the words he needs to speak. His eye bags are prominent tonight, and Izuku wonders if his own look the same. “I’m not gonna drag it out. Just tell me if you ever get that kind of urge again, alright? I know it was a while ago, but I also know how that stuff goes.”

Izuku nods quickly, relieved they’re not about to go into detail about that past can of worms, at least not yet. He’s not exactly sure how Aizawa found out he used to drink vodka on certain nights, but he figures it must’ve been somewhere around the time his apartment exploded. He can’t think straight right now, so maybe it’ll come to him later.

Aizawa stands up after another stretch of time and holds his hand out in Izuku’s direction. “You done?”

“Yeah,” he says, giving him his empty plate. “Thanks.”

And then Izuku is the one left alone when Aizawa disappears into the hallway and heads inside the office where Yamada is.

Too tired to move, really, Izuku rests his head on the table mat and closes his eyes.

Maybe some time inside One for All will make him happier.

Half of his woolen sweaters are missing.

Shouta knows who’s taking them. It’s *everyone.* Nemuri, the kid, his husband—they’re all thieves. Hell, he’s even seen *Snipe* wearing one of his sweaters on those rare days he’s not in his hero costume, and just how the fuck is *that* possible? Snipe hasn’t been in this apartment since they first moved in here!

Now, it’s common knowledge that the staff at UA are quite close, as most of them are close in age and thus most likely were in the same grade during their time as students, and they *do* share jackets and merch with each other as more of a joke than anything, but come on! His *sweaters?*

And Shouta doesn't usually care about this type of stuff, but now that it's getting even chillier at night, he does actually need to worry about what he wears. Sure, he doesn't give a shit about the cold, but he doesn't exactly want to look like a weird person who's asking to catch a cold to bystanders.

Especially when he's got the kid with him.

So, the only feasible reaction now is for Shouta to go into his husband's side of the closet and take one of his sweaters, which just happens to be a bright yellow one with white and black stripes.

It's from one of his first edition Present Mic Winter merch lines. Shouta actually remembers when Hizashi brought this one home.

He puts it on and walks out of the bedroom, only mildly annoyed. He sees Midoriya with his head on the table, passed out, and he looks so dead asleep that it almost stops Shouta entirely from his plans. But nonetheless, he knows it's not good to be sleeping upright like that on the dining table, nor sanitary. He passes by him to put on his boots by the door and then picks up a green scarf. He throws it at his student's back without looking.

"You ready, kid, or what?"

Midoriya stirs awake and lifts his head in confusion. "Huh?"

"We're going to get ice cream, remember?" Shouta wraps his own scarf around his neck. "We have to go now if we want to make it before they close."

Midoriya gets to his feet and stretches almost like a cat. "But I didn't get to see Hound Dog," he says, confused.

Shouta waves him off. "You were planning to, and that's about all that matters in my book. Not like you planned for everything else to happen."

Accepting the answer, Midoriya follows him out the door. "But what about Yama?"

"I already told him."

"He doesn't want to come?"

Shouta hesitates in answering, instead taking a second to focus on

locking the door. “He’s not in the mood for ice cream tonight.”

Midoriya whispers out an *oh,* and Shouta feels another one of those foreign emotions spark inside him. Is this one guilt? Huh. That’s weird. Is this how *Midoriya* is feeling right now? It can’t be Shouta’s guilt, as he has no reason to be feeling like that at this very moment. It’s like the guilt is an extension of his body.

Deciding he’ll deal with that later, as he has more important matters right now, Shouta leads Midoriya down the stairs and out into the city.

They walk the entire way, as Shouta would never operate a vehicle even with *one* sip of alcohol in his veins. Though to be clear he isn’t even close to being drunk, much less tipsy.

He’s still at his highest alertness. He always makes sure to be.

The ice cream place they go to is in a secluded little area, so thankfully there’s not too big of a line tonight. Shouta opens the door and hears the trill of the bell immediately after. He beckons Midoriya inside and looks at the menu, squinting. He really should’ve brought his glasses for this, now that he’s thinking about it.

He’s about to ask Midoriya what he’s going to get when suddenly the boy quickly moves behind him and tugs on his sleeve.

“Hey,” Midoriya whispers hurriedly, making Shouta’s head swivel around to stare at him.

“What?”

“One of my clients is here.”

“Your what?”

“Client. From *you know what.”*

Shouta’s nose wrinkles at this, and he makes a mental note to teach the boy later about wording when out in public, as an old lady is now giving the two of them judgmental looks. He follows Midoriya's finger and sees one of his partners from his agency handing a small vanilla cone to a young girl.

A pro hero? A client? Shouta can’t say he’s surprised. He always knew that man was lax about certain criminals and vigilantes. It’s no

wonder he's a client at the Club.

As if sensing his gaze, the other underground hero looks up and meets Shouta's eyes. His face lights up, but he only smiles and nods knowingly in his direction. He doesn't say a word as he walks out with who Shouta guesses is his daughter.

Shouta thinks he remembers him mentioning having one before.

With the man now gone, Midoriya moves out of his spot behind Shouta, shivering.

"Why'd you hide?" Shouta asks, slightly suspicious. "It's not like he'd recognize you."

Midoriya shakes his head. "Dunno. He's just always been weird. Always felt like he knew more than he let on." He gives Shouta a slightly accusatory look. "But now I know why. I had a feeling he'd be with your lot."

Not sure if that's supposed to be offensive or not, Shouta decides to just let it go. He pays for their dessert, and eventually they find themselves up on their old rooftop. The same one they used to meet at nearly every Friday night for months. Shouta isn't actually sure how it happened. They just sort of drifted there like the wind.

Midoriya got a chocolate mint hot fudge sundae with M&Ms crushed into it, and Shouta got a pistachio waffle cone. It's nothing fancy, but Shouta enjoys it.

"That's an old people flavor," Midoriya says, crunching on an M&M.

Shouta rolls his eyes. "It's good."

"Yeah, that's what old people say."

Shouta kicks him in the shin, and Midoriya giggles.

And for just a moment, a quick sliver of a second, Shouta can pretend they're back on patrol laughing and joking around during a time when neither of them could ever imagine the horrors that laid behind the other's eyes.

Chapter End Notes

> there is something so very soft about the relationship between a young boy who can't remember how to love and a damaged man

who was convinced he could never afford to

this chap was written almost entirely while I was listening to cardigan-taylor on yt

also sry for the awkwardness in the beginning of the chap LMAO. I've never been confident in writing "x reacts to video/reveal" stuff so I hope it wasn't too cringe. imma be editing it heavily later on tho so.
r

designer drugs

Chapter Notes

(cw: mentions of alteration by drugs/injections/experimentation)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku won't say that Aizawa ruins the moment, but he sort of *ruins the fucking moment.*

He's busy digging the hot fudge out of his sundae and calculating how much higher he'd have to be up for the fudge to be cold by the time it hits the ground upon being dropped when Aizawa clears his throat.

Which is never a good sign. Izuku can only hope Aizawa had something stuck in there and was trying to get it out.

"I don't want you to think anyone's mad at you," Aizawa begins slowly, casually, which makes Izuku deflate.

Yeah, so much for that.

He pauses in his eating but says nothing, so Aizawa continues. Neither of them are looking at each other. They never have to look at each other these days. They're somewhere past that, beyond the murky waters of trust.

"You're not in trouble, and no one's upset. I'm not upset." Aizawa's ankles cross over one another, and Izuku finds himself mirroring his teacher without thinking. "I know that… the video today obviously wasn't a great thing to see again. I know having it released to the public was probably the worst scenario imaginable, but it's out, so we have no other choice but to deal with it now. Make sense?"

Izuku nods, focusing on his reflection in his spoon.

"The main thing to take away from this, at least for you, is that the media is no longer calling Rabbit a murderer." Aizawa gestures vaguely with his cone, his voice still neutral and calm. Izuku wonders if he had to practice this speech beforehand. Would he be speaking differently if they weren't alone? "Support for you is overwhelming. I'm already receiving word that people are scheduling protests to fight

back against the organizations still trying to label you as a domestic terrorist."

At this, Izuku's brows turn up, and he clutches the cup of his sundae even tighter. "That's dangerous," he whispers, "them protesting. Something bad might happen."

It'll surely be a breeding ground for extremists and other groups, is what he means.

Aizawa shrugs, unbothered. "Well, we can't exactly stop them. They've all got strong hearts and minds. It's just like how Naomasa and I never quite managed to stop you when you were set on something you thought to be right."

Izuku looks at him, taking note of the way his black hair, which is frizzy and curly tonight, has fallen onto his shoulders. It's gotten long, telling Izuku he hasn't asked Yamada or Kayama to cut it for him in a while. The stubble on Aizawa's face has become darker and thicker, too. He hasn't shaved in a bit.

The boy briefly wonders why he's chosen not to.

Moonlight shines on Aizawa's skin, revealing a myriad of thin white scars along his neck and jaw that have long since healed. Each one holds a different story, a different fight, a different accident.

Izuku glances back down at the neon city. "I don't know how you guys put up with me for so long," he confesses.

Aizawa grunts. "We didn't exactly have a choice. It was either we looked after you or someone else would. And that wouldn't have gone well." He pauses, thinking. "I can't say it was never fun, though."

"Really?" Izuku's voice becomes a little higher; hopeful. "It was fun? Like, during our patrols?"

"Sometimes. When you weren't dancing in front of bullets."

Izuku blinks. "I don't remember ever doing that with you there."

"'Course you don't. It was always just another night for you, but not for me." As he says these words, Izuku senses a growing turmoil within him. Bitterness edges into his next sentence. "If you ever have a student of your own one day, you'll understand."

A student? Izuku ponders this for a moment. He's never entertained the idea of being a mentor or teacher for someone, mostly because he's not confident in his chances of even reaching that age or having that level of experience. But even past that, he just never thought he'd be a good role model. Hell, he barely has enough time to take care of himself! How will he be able to actually help someone else? And a student, no less!

But it would be… nice, wouldn't it? To have someone to care for, to share advice with, to tell stories to, to train. It would be fun. Sweet, even. They could cultivate the young seeds of hope he'll have to leave behind pretty soon and help the world in his place. They could be what he never could.

Izuku shakes himself. He can't have something like that, so there's no reason to even think about it. He can leave the mentoring to the qualified people.

A variety of emotions seep out of Aizawa's skin, and when Izuku looks at him, it becomes clear the man is reminiscing about something.

Izuku busies himself with picking out the rest of the chocolate chips and M&Ms in his sundae, unsure of where to go from here. He can't help but think of their less than pleasant conversation at the hospital that day. He recalls the things he said to Aizawa, the way he cursed at him, and he feels his stomach tie into knots.

"If I knew it was going to be like this," Izuku spits, liquid fire coursing through his veins, "I would've asked you to just leave me in my building that night to burn with everything else I had. I would've been better off!"

Did he really mean that? No, he couldn't have. Even at that moment, Izuku knew it was a mistake to say. He was aching to take it back, to apologize, to beg Aizawa to forget he said it at all, but he fought the urges. He wanted it to hurt, he wanted it *out* of him, just to have it out in the open for the both of them to hear.

If only Izuku could go back in time. He'd slap himself across the face to get his past self to shut up if that's what it would take.

Izuku fiddles with his scarf. Similar to that day, he gets the sudden urge to take it back. His mouth opens, then closes, and he bites the inside of his cheek. His lips form around an apology, but he's not sure how to word it.

Would it even be well-received?

“You did some interesting things during your fight,” Aizawa starts, wiping Izuku’s mind completely from his previous thoughts. “Things I never imagined you could do just from watching you fight villains before.”

Izuku doesn’t freak out. He knew this would happen eventually. He was banking on it, actually. He’s just too exhausted right now to really think about what this means for him in the future.

So, Izuku does nothing but stare into his cup of ice cream. It’s cold out, sure, but that doesn’t stop the ice cream from melting a little. He likes his ice cream a little liquidy anyway.

“If it weren’t for the circumstances, y’know, I’d say it was all impossible.” Aizawa lifts a shoulder, unperturbed. “Like it was all fake. With how shit the camera quality was on the video, you never know. It could have all been some quick editing.”

“It wasn’t edited,” Izuku says, signing his own death warrant with a pretty pen.

“I know,” Aizawa responds simply. “I could tell.”

“How?” Izuku asks despite not truly caring for the answer.

“The look on your face when you walked into the lounge with All Might. It told me everything I needed to know.”

A car honks in the distance, and another aggressive beep follows it, along with yelling. Izuku searches for the scene with his eyes. “Oh,” is all he says.

Aizawa turns to him, but his face is still carefully blank. “I’ve seen these things happen before. It used to be a more common occurrence a few years ago, back when designer drugs were the new thing and everyone wanted to enhance themselves and bring out the full power of their quirk. Now, I might be wrong, but I don’t think that this—”

“It’s not Trigger,” Izuku interrupts, knowing immediately what he’s referring to. “Not Trigger, or—or *anything* like that. I never injected myself with that sort of stuff.”

The man hums. “I didn’t think you did.”

Something about the way Aizawa doesn’t hesitate when he says it makes Izuku feel better about the situation. He swallows and wishes

he had some water for his dry throat. “I—I would never do that.”

“Not willingly,” Aizawa says, and it sounds open-ended, like he’s insinuating something.

Izuku closes his eyes, and he sees thick bottle-green glasses and pristine white lab coats behind his eyelids. He feels poison in his veins and sees vials of his blood being carted away, and he shivers. “Not willingly,” he agrees numbly. “But I—I still never… I can do a lot of different things, but not because of a drug. I just can.”

“You have surgical scars on your back and abdomen. Needle tears, too.”

The abruptness of the sentence makes Izuku’s entire body go rigid, and he gives the man a bewildered, almost scared look. “I—”

“They’re from years ago, sure, but the old lady still said it couldn’t have been done by an amateur.” Aizawa breaks off a piece of his waffle cone and studies it. “The records she did manage to recover from your previous doctor don’t note any surgeries, so you’ll forgive us if we think the worst.”

A good portion of Izuku’s skin is scar tissue, and while a lot of it is from his endeavors as a vigilante and a reckless street rat, he can’t say his father’s doctor never left a mark on him. The worst of the marks aren’t physical, however.

“Those were accidents from when I was a kid,” Izuku murmurs. He flicks a leaf off the roof and watches it tumble to the ground far below. “My doctor sorta messed up. Father never… he, uh, took care of it. When he found out.” He winces, remembering the crazed look in All for One’s eyes when he noticed the bandages on his son’s body upon returning home after an errand. “It never happened again after that.”

“So he’s not the one who did that to you?” Although not demanding, Aizawa’s voice has a sharp edge to it now. “It was your doctor?”

Izuku wrinkles his nose and tips his head to stare at him. It’s a loaded question, and he senses the trap, but he takes the bait anyway. “He was a mad scientist. A coworker of my father’s. You know how it is.” A small, humorless smile stretches onto Izuku’s lips. “They love their experiments.”

“And you were his.” It’s not a question. There’s something strangely

grim in Aizawa's expression.

"Sometimes I was. Other times I just wasn't giving him what he was hoping for, I think. He liked my blood." Izuku pulls himself away from those thoughts. "But I—I meant what I said. My quir—the things I can do, it's not because of a chemical alteration. It wasn't because of… any of that. I'm past that."

"I believe you," Aizawa says simply, and that phrase alone makes Izuku less tense.

He takes a few seconds to recuperate from that specific topic, and he feels his ears begin to burn from the childishness of it all. His old doctor's failed tests happened years ago, but Izuku can recall the straps that went across his body and secured him to that dreadful table like it was only yesterday. He remembers the feeling of the wires cutting into his skin and causing blood to spill with how much he writhed and struggled, and he can feel the liquid fire coursing through his veins from the leftover anesthesia that never seemed to work on him.

It was a long time ago, and the doctor paid for his actions dearly once All for One returned home, so in all senses Izuku should be over it. He shouldn't be so stuck up on it, right? He thought he stamped out that memory, never to be seen or revisited again. He was supposed to have grown from it.

It seems he was wrong. It's nothing new these days.

"Don't fall asleep now," Aizawa says, leaning over to flick Izuku's nose. "You'll topple right off this roof, and I'd have to waste this ice cream to jump after you."

Izuku coughs into his hand, letting the environment around him bring him back to the present. "You wouldn't need to. I always land on my feet."

Aizawa's brow raises, but he doesn't say anything to refute this statement even though Izuku is certain he has over twenty examples disproving it.

He doesn't want to continue this conversation, as strangely comfortable as it is, but he also thinks that he may as well. There's not going to be such an open opportunity to do this again for a while yet, he bets. Besides, Aizawa is obviously trying to be better at this, so why shouldn't Izuku do the same? He feels bad for making everyone else

have to change when it was his fault to begin with.

"Trust is a two lane road," he remembers Yamada telling him. *"It works best when it comes from both directions."*

Maybe Izuku should start driving on his side too to make the process easier.

"I told you a long time ago that my quirk is like a grab bag," Izuku starts with a sharp intake of breath. "I… because it's an enhancement quirk, it constantly strengthens parts of my body. It allows me to do a lot of different things if I focus my energy on certain areas."

Aizawa leans back. "If it was really that simple, why would you hide it? You were holding yourself back."

Izuku swings his feet. "People don't like things they've never seen before. They, uh, don't like things that seem like they have multiple quirks, because it's wrong, y'know? It's not… natural. It's impossible. And you've probably heard how people talk about Todoroki's quirk online. Not everyone is impressed by it."

"If it's a part of you," Aizawa counters, "you shouldn't hide it. Todoroki is beginning to learn that slowly as well, but for different reasons."

I'm not as stupid as you think, is what Aizawa is really saying. Izuku can hear it clearly in the silence that stretches between them once more. The pro hero is slowly pushing Izuku into a corner and carefully forcing him to talk about it more, but Izuku's been in this corner for a long time now. It doesn't feel as threatening as before. Maybe he's not in a corner at all, though, and he's actually in a locked room by choice. Maybe right now he's letting Aizawa take the door off the hinges and walk in, secretly relieved.

Izuku takes a breath in, and then out. He feels lightheaded. He focuses on the taste of the chocolate mint ice cream lingering in his mouth so he doesn't back away. "What if… What if I… What would you *say* if—if I…" He stops short out of frustration and wills himself to just push forward. After literal years of hiding this, after waking up to earth shattering *nightmares* about this exact scenario happening before, it feels weird to be allowing this.

It feels unbelievable to even be entertaining this.

Izuku shakes his head. "What if I told you…"

“You can start with hypothetically.”

Izuku pauses. “What?”

Aizawa doesn’t look at him. “It made it easier last time, didn’t it?”

Oh. A lump lodges in Izuku’s throat, and this time he knows it’s going to be genuinely impossible to get rid of it, so Izuku doesn’t say anything aloud. He doesn’t explain.

He just shows.

Izuku sets his sundae off to the side, his nerves on fire, and takes his phone out of his pocket. Without hesitation, he drops the very expensive piece of technology over the edge of the roof.

As Aizawa starts, confused and shocked, Izuku extends his palm out and mentally forms the connection. He feels the weight of the phone as it stops in midair for just a second before beginning to fly back up. It’s like reeling in a fish, except there’s not as much work involved.

In a matter of five seconds, the phone is safely back in Izuku’s hand, unharmed.

He holds it out to Aizawa, movements jerky, as if to show proof that it’s the same phone. Aizawa looks from Izuku to the phone and back again, face pinched. He still looks bewildered, but when he takes the phone from Izuku’s hand to inspect it himself, eventually his expression smooths back out into something more curious.

“Telekinesis?” Aizawa asks.

“Sort of.” Izuku flexes his fingers. “I can use my palms and fingers like magnets. If I see an object or envision a string between my hand and whatever else, I can pull it towards me. It doesn’t have to be metal.”

Aizawa holds out his own hand in question, and Izuku lets him look at his palms without thinking. He shouldn’t have been so willing, however, as then Aizawa points to the small holes in the middle of Izuku’s palms and looks back up at him. “Is that where the ‘magnets’ are?”

Izuku jerks his arms away, hairs rising. “No,” he mutters. “That’s something else.”

Thankfully, Aizawa doesn’t push the subject, instead going right back

to the matter at hand. “What are the limits to it?”

“The object I pull has to be something tangible. Er, concentrated, I guess. I’m not able to pull any kind of air or anything unless it’s heavier than propane gas. And even then it doesn’t really work.” Izuku scratches his neck. “The weight limit is upwards of seven hundred pounds now. I’ve managed to make it stronger than before.”

“Seven hundred,” Aizawa repeats, nodding to himself. “That’s useful.”

“Yeah. I can, uh, also use it to pull myself towards something if it’s way over my limit. Like a building.”

This makes a lightbulb go off in Aizawa’s eyes. “That’s how you managed to survive jumping out of that helicopter, right? You pulled on that hotel and it sent you shooting right into the windows. Smart move.”

Izuku nods, beginning to flush. “And—and I guess it makes for a good combo when I’m using *this.”* Deciding to rip it all off quickly like a bandaid, Izuku crosses his arms and calls his shimmering shield to mind. Deflect buzzes to life, as vibrant as ever. It thrums and refracts some of the city lights around them, catching Aizawa’s attention.

The man squints at it, frowning, and at Izuku’s encouraging nod he lifts a hand and presses on it gently. When he doesn’t go through it, he applies a bit more force. “An invisible barrier? You used this one with Stain too.”

“It’s like glass,” Izuku explains. “It’ll shatter if enough pressure is applied at a continuous rate, but it’s strong enough to stop a bullet as long as I’m not being pelted by them.”

Aizawa’s eyes flick up. “Learned that from experience, did you?”

Izuku’s lips form into a thin line. “Something like that.”

“Does the shield follow you when you move?” He presses on it with his other hand now, feeling around the edges to see how wide it is. “I don’t suppose you can make more than one and give them to others in the middle of a fight.”

“No. I wish I could, though. It only works for me, and I can’t, like, pick it up and move it around or anything. It just follows the center of where my arms cross.”

Aizawa hums, seemingly lost in thought. “What else can you do?”

Feeling suddenly uncomfortable now, Izuku drops Deflect and picks his sundae up, going back to fishing out the hot fudge. “A couple other things. But I, er, can’t really use either of them right now. I don’t know what it would do, honestly. I… I can force a quirk to activate by touching someone else’s skin. It usually pushes the quirk to its very limits, so I try not to use it often.”

The hero catches on rather quickly. “The end of your fight with Bakugou at the festival. That was—”

“Yeah. That was me.” The cold begins to bite at Izuku’s skin, so he hides his face more in his scarf. “I pushed his quirk past the threshold. It was an accident.”

“It nearly knocked him out. That’s pretty powerful. It’d make for a good *last resort* option in a fight if things go south.”

Izuku nods in agreement. “That’s how I would use it on patrol sometimes. But I’m always afraid it’ll…” He makes a sharp gesture across his neck, and Aizawa makes a noise of understanding.

“How long have you been hiding this?” He asks, still sounding so nonjudgmental.

Worrying his bottom lip, Izuku fidgets. “Forever.”

“You’ve always been able to do this stuff?”

“Not always,” he amends, “but long enough.” When Aizawa just stares, Izuku continues with a racing mind. “I… developed them at different ages. But I got my last one, er… a few years ago, I think. You’ve seen me use some of them before during our patrols, but I don’t think you ever realized it. I was always careful not to get caught on video.” He averts his gaze. “Until Hosu.”

Aizawa’s long hair lifts off his neck when a good gust of wind passes over them. “Can’t say I blame you for not noticing the camera. You had other things to worry about then.” When he speaks again, he sounds more cautious than before. “I can see why you wouldn’t want the public to know, but why did you try so hard to hide it from me?”

Izuku thinks for a second, trying to find a way to say this that won’t be offensive. “It’s not that I thought you’d do anything to me,” he says quietly, his words nearly lost to the wind, “I just didn’t want to put

you in any weird positions. Because if someone else found out, you might've been questioned too, and you would have—*we* would've been hurt. And I didn't want to take that chance."

Aizawa eyes glint in the light, and Izuku feels Extract ripple in his mind when he notices the faint red hue in his teacher's gaze. "You didn't want people to take you, is that it? They'd think you were a rare phenomenon or something."

A rare phenomenon, Second repeats bitterly. *It's almost insulting that these new generations don't know anything about the years when All for One ruled. Nearly all of his followers had multiple quirks; it was never considered rare. Most everyone wanted more than one, and they pledged their loyalty to him in exchange for them.*

Surprisingly, First's voice sounds right next to Izuku's ear. *We should feel happy, not insulted. If the children now don't remember the terrors of my brother, then we've done something right. They deserve to live without fear.*

They can live without fear while still remembering what it was like for everyone else, Third comments. *He's still alive, anyway. They'll know of him soon enough.*

Izuku's heart jumps. *I won't let him take over again,* he promises abruptly, for once not sounding shaky. *All Might didn't, so I can't either.*

He doesn't receive a response, and Izuku isn't sure if that's good or bad. Realizing Aizawa is still waiting for his response, the boy coughs into his scarf. "Yeah. It's why I'm not the biggest fan of doctors."

"You don't want a repeat of before," Aizawa guesses, blunt but not cruel.

Izuku can only nod.

The pro hero accepts this as a response. "Well, then it might be best if you avoid using them if you don't have to, just to be safe."

"I know." Izuku clutches his cup even tighter. "Do… Do you think I should just go ahead and use them when I'm… *vigilante-ing,* though? Since…"

"Might as well. The rabbit's already out of the bag."

Izuku snorts and shoots him a look. “That’s not funny.”

“You just laughed.”

Indignant, Izuku pointedly turns away and finishes off his ice cream, as it’s now more of a puddle of mint liquid than anything. “It was a pity laugh.”

“I bet it was,” is all Aizawa says, clearly disbelieving. But then, after a few more moments of silence, Aizawa turns to face him fully, back to being serious once again. Izuku wonders how he’s so good at that—turning emotions off. That’s usually something you have to learn; you’re not just born with that ability most times. “Can you be truthful with me for a second?”

Izuku fights to not outwardly show his sudden *blinding* panic when he nods with doe eyes.

“Are you telling me all this because you’re about to leave?”

That’s… certainly not what Izuku was expecting. The boy frowns, and his mouth opens and closes as he thinks of a valid response. He was thinking of all the possible things Aizawa could’ve asked him after saying that, but this wasn’t at all close to any of them. Hell, he thought Aizawa was going to straight up call him out on his lie and reveal that he knows the powers are actually multiple quirks and not just different facets of *Boost.*

For the first time in a very long time, Aizawa genuinely stumps Izuku.

He’s still looking at Izuku, his eyes searching the boy’s face for something specific. Back then, Izuku would feel uncomfortable by the way he’s scrutinizing him so openly, but now he doesn’t feel that way at all. He feels lighter, actually. More accepting.

And what a weird feeling that is.

“No?” Izuku says, still a little confused.

Aizawa’s grip loosens on his waffle cone, and faint relief permeates through the air. “Then why are you?”

“Because you asked.”

I don’t like lying anymore, Izuku wishes he had the courage to say instead. *It doesn’t feel like it used to. It’s tiring. I don’t think I’ve ever felt*

this exhausted before.

“I see.” When Aizawa processes the words, Izuku senses a growing emotion inside of him that he can’t identify. “It was four years, right?” Izuku only blinks at the almost-question, confused, so the man adds rather lamely, “That you were alone.”

For once, Izuku doesn't flinch at the mention of his past homelessness. He just lets the careful words fold over him like a blanket. “Yeah.” He picks at a healing scab on his arm and only stops when he remembers he shouldn’t. “I ran from him when I was almost eleven, I think.”

“That’s a long time to be on the streets.”

“It wasn’t so bad.”

Aizawa pulls one of his legs up so he can rest his elbow on his knee. “Well, you were smarter than most, and you did the best you could with what you had. But I take it that even when you were with your dad, you had to mature quickly. It’s why you’re even more independent than others your age, I’m sure.”

Yeah, Izuku wants to say, *because if I didn’t take care of myself, if I didn’t try my hardest to stay afloat and find ways to get myself out of those holes, where would I be now? I never would’ve been able to leave.*

Izuku only had himself. He didn’t want it to be that way. God, he never wanted that. No child would. But that’s just the way it was. Kurogiri was limited, and Tomura—er, Shigaraki—was already so deep into his hatred for the world and heroes within it that Izuku could never help.

He was stuck. And when a kid is stuck in a hole for a long, long time, eventually they stop looking for a way out. Eventually they stop screaming and begging for help and change.

Eventually they make the hole their home. And that loneliness becomes second nature. It becomes preferred.

When Izuku escaped that facility with the lingering burns of those hot flames branded onto his freckled skin, he didn’t want to be alone. He didn’t want to have to be the one to make those life-or-death decisions for himself.

But he needed to. Because it was all he knew. He was safe when he was the one making the decisions, so Izuku knew he had to be the one

in charge.

Always.

He convinced himself it was the only way to live.

Something about the way Izuku is staring below himself must tell Aizawa that he's thinking hard about something, because when the man speaks again, it's still slow and undemanding.

"I know you never wanted to go to UA, at least according to what Yagi told me. I know that you probably never wanted to have to stay with Hizashi and I, too." A gentle cloud escapes his mouth and rises to the stars. "It probably felt like you had no other choice, because you didn't, truthfully."

Jail, foster care, or hero school. Those were the choices Izuku had to juggle. Sure, he could've escaped foster care, but they all would've looked for him, and that would have proven to be way too troublesome, so Izuku had kicked that away as an option totally. And jail? Well, there's no telling what experiments they would've tried if the Hero's Commission got wind of his identity. So, naturally, Izuku had only one feasible option left.

Interestingly enough, though, it was the option he was most scared of.

"Going from being your own caretaker for years to having more bossy adults around you to last you a lifetime…" Aizawa huffs out a humorless laugh. "That sort of thing probably doesn't make you feel so great. I'm sure it… hurts. Because you were taking care of yourself and trying to stay alive for damn near all of your life, and then suddenly you didn't have to. Suddenly you were stripped of your ability to make your own choices. And we never talked things out."

His words sound very soft, but it doesn't make Aizawa seem weak. He is never weak. He sounds factual, but his words are tinged with honey, and it reminds Izuku of Kurogiri: blunt, logical, but never callous.

"And we never asked, did we?" Aizawa continues, and it's clearly rhetorical, but Izuku feels the quiet urge to defend his teachers anyway.

"Yama sort of did," Izuku says. "And—and Yagi. We talked sometimes."

“Sure we did, but we never really explained everything. We never asked you how you felt about it. I guess we sorta forgot how things were for you even before you were on the streets. And that wasn’t very fair of us to do that to you.”

Izuku doesn’t know what to say to that, so he doesn’t speak. Having his feelings be vocalized so simply would make him feel embarrassed if it were coming from anyone other than Aizawa, but as it stands, Izuku doesn’t quite feel uncomfortable.

“We’ll try not to be so overbearing anymore, kid. We should’ve realized that what we were doing wasn’t…” He searches for the word. “Acceptable. Or right. In fact, everything we’ve been doing has sort of shit on all of your hard work. And I’ll try not to let that continue.”

Izuku isn’t too sure what to make of this. On one hand, he likes the sound of that—his teachers being less overbearing. Does that mean less rules? Less of them second guessing him, less of them telling him that he’s weak and needs to stay *put,* to not do what he does best, less of all the *bad* things? That would be great.

On the other hand, Izuku doesn’t know what will change between them in the future. He doesn’t know how that dynamic will look. Will it be similar to how they were when they were both just a Hero and Vigilante duo? Well, they live together now, so that’s never going to be the same as it was. If not that, what will they be like? Acquaintances? Just teacher-student?

Why is it that Izuku doesn’t think he wants to even go back to what they used to be? Maybe there are certain things about their relationship now that he wants to keep. Maybe it’s not all bad.

Maybe he’s scared of losing everyone.

After Aizawa says this, he clears his throat and seems to collect himself. Again, Izuku wishes he could understand half of what he’s thinking. But he doesn’t get a chance to ponder on it for too long, as then Aizawa is reaching out with a hand and resting it lightly on Izuku’s shoulder for just a second in what’s probably supposed to be a comforting pat. His touch is awkward and barely there, and his hesitance shines through clearly despite the forced assurance of his voice. “Midoriya, if you’re dead set on this Commission thing, just know I’ll be there to help work things out and make sure it’s relatively safe, no matter what.”

I’ll listen, goes unsaid but not unheard. *I’ll be on your side this time*

around.

Izuku is momentarily stunned. He swivels around to gawk at him, disbelieving, but after seeing no signs of lying, he fixes his expression. He takes a second to just be there, relishing in the chilly wind around him and the feeling of Erasure and thousands of other quirks brimming around the city.

The sound the students all made around him in that hallway when Native was ripped apart on screen comes back to him, and the muted thud of his head hitting the cracked concrete haunts him.

And Izuku thinks then that sometimes it costs too much to make adults take a wounded child seriously.

“Izuku,” the boy says after a while, thinking of cat socks and hot chocolate and shared knives.

Aizawa grunts out a *what,* so Izuku shrugs.

“You—you guys can call me by my first name if you, uh, want. I’ve just never liked my last name.”

Izuku waits with stiff muscles, but Aizawa doesn’t ask why. He doesn’t pry at all, and for that, Izuku is grateful.

“Alright,” Aizawa allows. There’s another brief, awkward pause, and then, “Izuku.”

Izuku shivers. It’s weird hearing his teacher say his first name, but somehow it’s not bad. Only the Bakugous and Ms. Hanako calls him by it. His mother used to, along with Kurogiri. So, in all senses, it’s not *totally* foreign to him, but it does spark the beginning of something new forming inside his mind.

As the temperature drops even lower, Izuku very, very slowly moves a little closer to Aizawa’s side. There are only inches in between them now, and this time around the space isn’t electrified or tense. It’s just warm.

He’s cautious in his movements. Aizawa must have noticed, but he doesn’t do anything to move away or tell Izuku he wants him to stop. So the boy—slower than he’s ever had before—rests the side of his head on his teacher’s shoulder. He doesn’t put all of his weight into it until he’s sure Aizawa isn’t about to push him away.

When Aizawa only raises his waffle cone to his mouth to take another bite, Izuku figures this is allowed. So he lets himself relax and tries hard not to back away from this.

Honestly, Izuku had prepared himself for a much different reaction to his quirks upon leaving the house. He knows Aizawa isn't usually one to overreact—not on the outside at least, but he still thought he'd be in for *something.* Maybe he'll get a real reaction later on. Right here, though? That's not his problem to worry about.

For now, Izuku tells himself he can afford to be relieved.

His vestige is floating.

Izuku stands in the middle of the common area inside One for All with his hand on his chin, thinking. His cloudy vestige is simply hovering over him, a good twenty feet in the air, without even using his wings. Faint smoke leaves his form and messes up Izuku's vision a little. The boy wonders if this is normal.

Sure, this place isn't exactly real life and thus isn't realistic, so Izuku and the other vestiges can do pretty much anything they want here without consequence, but there are still some limits, right?

That being said, Izuku doesn't think his One for All self—which isn't even a full vestige, keep in mind, saying as Izuku is still alive—should be able to fucking *float.*

Izuku can't float, so his vestige shouldn't be able to either. It's not fair. And also, why does his vestige's head keep snapping from side to side, as if hearing something no one else can hear? It's creepy as fuck.

Red lightning cracks around Vestige Izuku's body, but he doesn't move from his spot. He's simply just there, above the ground, unmoving and silent.

It pisses Izuku off.

Standing up on his assigned chair, Izuku tries to get a better look at

him. “You’re being a creep!” he calls, and Vestige Izuku actually looks down at him this time… but only for about three seconds before going back to what he was doing before, unperturbed.

Which is, frankly, very Izuku-like.

But this only makes Izuku more upset. He’s not sure why his vestige self immediately makes him feel so bloodthirsty upon being even within twenty feet from him, but he does. So, logically, the only thing Izuku can do from here is take out his Net Launcher from his pocket.

He found it sitting around in his realm, unused, so of course he has to use it. And what a perfect opportunity this is!

He fires it with no real hesitation, but Vestige Izuku senses it coming before it can even reach him. The cloudy figure twists to face Izuku and easily sends the net hurtling back toward him. In half a second’s time, Izuku is caught in the wires and stuck against his throne, and when he looks back up, Not Izuku is gone.

Figures.

He sighs and accepts his fate, not bothering to free himself. He’ll get the jump on Vestige Izuku one of these days. There’s only room for one of them in this place anyway.

Izuku doesn’t like sharing.

“Did he get you again?” En asks, materializing in front of Izuku in a wisp of smoke.

“I was closer this time,” Izuku says, completely lying.

“You’ll get him eventually.”

Izuku lets his head drop. “He’s not even technically alive, so how is he beating me?”

Banjou’s sharp laugh reaches Izuku’s ears. The big man drops down from somewhere above and puts his hands on his hips. “I asked myself that all the time when I kept trying to brawl with your master, kid!”

En turns to Banjou. “That’s slightly different. All Might is the strongest. It’s pitiful to even attempt a fight against him, even when it’s just his vestige.” He tips his head at Izuku. “Besides, Ninth here is fighting with himself. I can understand the frustration. I’ve had many

fights such as this myself."

The sage-like way in which he says it makes Izuku cringe. Shimura never told him her predecessor was emo. The outfit should've been the first clue, Izuku thinks. Him and Shinomori must get along great.

Who knew One for All had so many weird users? Of course, Izuku isn't included in that.

He likes to think he's the most normal of them all.

"If it makes you feel any better, First hasn't had much luck with fighting your other self either," En reports.

Izuku doesn't think he's heard him correctly at first. He frowns, mind short circuiting. "Huh?" He activates Boost, and the wire net breaks apart when he flexes his muscles. Free, Izuku can now look at En more clearly. "He's fought me before?"

The black-haired man simply stares. "Multiple times. You're very protective over certain parts of your realm. Sometimes, First strays too far, I believe."

What the *fuck?* Izuku's vestige has beef with his uncle? What's that all about?

The boy wonders why his vestige has been so anxious and active lately. Maybe Izuku's feelings from the real world are transferring over. Or maybe Vestige Izuku is just always like this. The others don't seem particularly worried, though, so Izuku shouldn't be either.

Perhaps Izuku's One for All counterpart is more real than he is.

"You don't think I should gel my hair?" Aizawa asks his husband, one eyebrow raised as he finishes getting his shoes on.

Yamada, who has a comb between his teeth, shakes his head. "It's dinner, Shouta, not a press conference. We don't want to look too formal."

“Well, I figured we should at least look presentable, since we’re his teachers and all.”

“We’re not going there as just teachers,” Yamada reminds with a roll of the eyes. “He’s living with us now, and while the Bakugous don’t know his father isn’t exactly coming back from that extended business trip, we still need to make a good impression. It’ll be weird if we go there all cold and business-like.”

Izuku coughs into his elbow sleeve. He’s wearing a nice shirt and pants, as directed by Yamada, and has the longer portions of his hair tied back in an intricate braid. He’s also wearing some of All Might’s cologne, which he stole a few nights before. “They’re fashion designers, so they sorta judge. Internally.”

Aizawa nods. “See? My point exactly. We have to look nice.”

Yamada huffs. “We *do* look nice. Your hair looks way better without gel in it. You washed it at least, right? As long as it’s not greasy, you’ll be fine.”

“Auntie likes long hair,” Izuku adds, staring at his knees as he waits for them to be ready. “She’ll love it if you both leave your hair down. She gets along with people more easily if they look model-ready.” He gives a furtive glance in Yamada’s direction. “She hates black leather, though.”

Yamada, who is currently wearing black leather pants, sighs in defeat and returns to his room.

“I thought that was a little over the top anyway,” Aizawa says to Izuku, who smiles in response.

“Looked nice, though,” he says.

Aizawa agrees with him but probably for a much different reason.

When Yamada comes back out, this time wearing a pair of fashionable white jeans, they’re ready to go. Izuku follows them out of the apartment and trudges behind Aizawa on the way to the car.

“Worried?” Aizawa asks, blowing a hot breath into his hands. It’s chillier tonight than it was last night.

Izuku shrugs and rubs his bad arm, wishing he had something thicker on than this long-sleeved shirt. “Why would I be? I’m not planning on

telling them anything."

Pushing a jacket that he pulled out of seemingly nowhere into Izuku's chest, Aizawa grunts. "Just asking."

"You sure you don't want to tell them about *you know what?"* Yamada asks. He unlocks the car and immediately starts the heater. "Might make you feel better to not be lying to them anymore."

Izuku shakes his head. "It would kill her."

"You think so?" Yamada replies.

Izuku sits in the back seat and rests his forehead on the side of the door. He's had a migraine for hours now and nothing is working. Plus, Yamada forced him to take that liquid anti-seizure medicine again before he left, and that, coupled with his own pill from the Doctor at the club, isn't doing him any favors. "I know it," he mutters. "She's always felt bad. Like she—she wasn't doing enough. I tried to reassure her, but I couldn't do a lot considering that…"

"Considering her fears were right?" Aizawa deadpans.

"It would hurt her if she knew I was on the streets that whole time and never came to her. And if I told her about Rabbit now, with everything that's just come out, I don't think she'd want me to leave at all." He closes his eyes. "I don't want to do that to her."

"She sounds like a strong woman," Yamada says, and he lets out a light chuckle then. "Especially since she's Bakugou's mother. But I'm sure it wouldn't be as bad as you think, kiddo. Trust me, I feel like she'd want to know."

"But that's the problem," Izuku says, tucking his face more into the jacket Aizawa gave him. "She's always been there for me, ever since my mom… ever since she left. She—she feels like she has some kind of responsibility to take care of me, and she's never said no to me staying the night or going over. She already has so much on her plate that I just don't want her to think she's—like she failed or something, when she hasn't. She's done so much for me."

There's a short pause as Izuku's words invade the empty space, and when the boy looks up, he sees his two teachers glancing quickly at each other, an unidentified emotion shared between them. This, for some reason, just makes Izuku regret ever opening his mouth.

“Nevermind,” he says weakly, but Aizawa answers anyway, his words smooth.

“You can’t control how other people feel, but what you can control is how you react. She’s going to find out one of these days anyway, M—Izuku, and I think she’d appreciate it if it came from you.” He moves his seat back and rests his capture weapon over his face, as if to signal that what’s said is said. “Tonight probably wouldn’t be a good time, I agree. But just think about it for later. It’s like you said—she’s always been there, so I don’t think this would change anything between the two of you. You never know; she might be more keen than you think.”

Yamada hums in agreement and then turns on the radio when it’s clear Izuku has nothing else to say.

The ride to the Bakugou household is pretty long, as they live in the nicer neighborhoods on the other side of the city. Traffic is a bitch, and Yamada lays on his horn a few times with flared nostrils, getting more annoyed by the minute.

“Feet,” he reminds sharply sometime on the way, shoving Aizawa’s boots off the dash with a glare. “We just got all of this re-oiled, are you kidding me?”

Aizawa pretends he didn’t hear him, and the car ride continues.

“I wish we could’ve brought Missy,” Izuku mumbles, staring out at the passing lights of downtown Musutafu. “She hasn’t been over to their house in a long time.”

“Maybe next time,” Yamada promises, only to raise his voice and curse at a sudden jaywalker running past the road right afterwards. He continues as if it never happened. “It’s just a little too cold tonight, ya know? She’d be freezing.”

“She needs a sweater.”

“A tux-themed one would be cute,” Yamada agrees.

Aizawa stirs. “She could match Sushi. We already have one for him.”

“They’re partners in crime,” Izuku says. “Regal crime.”

The underground hero *hmphs*. “That’s ominous.”

“*You’re* ominous.”

Izuku isn't sure why Auntie suddenly wanted them all to come have dinner. At school today, Kacchan tracked Izuku down, shoved him into a nearby storage closet, and basically threatened him into coming over. When Izuku said he didn't think he'd be allowed to, especially after everything that happened, Kacchan said he didn't have an excuse, as Auntie invited the both of them along too.

Now, Izuku truthfully wasn't going to tell either of his teachers about it, but it didn't matter much, as Kacchan was the one who stayed a few minutes after the last bell and told Aizawa himself.

Izuku says *told* because Kacchan wasn't asking any kind of questions. He was telling.

Curse Aizawa for saying yes. Izuku thought he'd still be safe since Kacchan asked Aizawa and not Yamada. Turns out he was worried about the wrong person.

Izuku can't lie and say he's not a little scared. He's not scared of Auntie, of course—well, only sometimes—and he's not scared of Masaru. He doesn't think they're going to start something or be mean or whatnot, and he also doesn't think his *teachers* are going to start something. It's just that at school, Izuku was avoiding all of Kacchan's other attempts to talk to him. He knew what Kacchan was going to ask him, and he didn't want to deal with it or even think about it.

Does Kacchan deserve to know about what happened during Hosu? Yes. They're friends, and friends talk to each other. But does this make it any easier for Izuku to actually do? Absolutely fucking not.

Kacchan was his first *everything.* His first real friend, his first partner, his first hero. When his mother became the monster instead of the monster slayer, when All for One turned out to be just another villain like in those story books, when All Might never came to save little Izuku—Kacchan was there. For most of it, Kacchan was always ever present. For good or for worse, he was there, always within arms reach.

Izuku knows him from the inside out. He knows he hates the rain, not just because it washes off all his sweat and leaves him defenseless, but because he doesn't like the feeling of the knife-like droplets on his skin. He knows Kacchan has a birthmark on the back of his left thigh, he knows Kacchan has a scar on his lower ankle from falling off a tree bridge when they were both younger—he knows a lot.

And Kacchan knows Izuku.

So why would Izuku hide anything? It was foolish to even try to keep One for All from him, and Izuku still feels guilty over it, but this? Hosu? *Tsubasa?*

Somehow this feels worse.

Iida and Todoroki didn't come to school, not that Izuku can blame them. He wouldn't have either. It's just safer that way.

Despite their absence, they did text Izuku back to assure him they're okay, and also to apologize—which threw Izuku for a loop. Why are *they* apologizing? Why do *they* feel guilty?

They were there. They lived the horrors of Hosu alongside Izuku. Why should they be sorry? If anything, the world should be apologizing to Iida and Todoroki, not the other way around.

When they pull up into the driveway, Izuku calms himself by holding his breath for a few seconds. He's been to this house more times than he ever went to his old place, so it's not that he feels out of place. He just feels… different. With Yamada and Aizawa beside him, it feels like he's representing something more than he was before.

He fiddles with the cuffs of his jacket and casts a grateful look towards Aizawa when the man hands him the car keys. He doesn't know why, but for the past couple of days Aizawa and Yamada have just been giving Izuku things to hold onto. Whether it's a show of trust or because they genuinely don't want to be stuck holding it—Izuku doesn't know, and he doesn't care.

All he knows is that it calms him, so he's going to keep accepting the random things they hand him.

Yamada fixes his hair quickly before making his way to the front steps. Izuku pauses, awkward, as he realizes something.

"Aizawa," he says. Both of his teachers turn to him in question, so he forces himself to look both of them in the eye at least once before allowing himself to stare at the flowers growing on the side of the house. "She doesn't know about the other things I can do."

The underground hero seems to get it pretty quickly. "She doesn't know about any of them?"

"She's only seen me use some," Izuku says, "but not all." He thinks of Pull, and he bites his lip.

“So, I take it we shouldn’t mention that stuff at all just to be safe?” Yamada guesses, drawing out the *so*.

Izuku nods. “It wouldn’t be a problem, but I just don’t want to overwhelm her.”

“Gotcha!” Yamada raises a fist to politely knock, but his knuckles haven’t even touched the wood yet before the door bursts open with a fiery blast.

Kacchan doesn’t even look at his teachers—his eyes go straight to Izuku. He’s stomping down the steps before anyone can say anything to him. “Damn nerd! There you are!”

“And there *you* are,” Izuku says cheekily, his mood instantly lifting just by seeing the blond in his natural habitat. He yelps when he’s yanked inside the house easily by the collar of his shirt.

“They’re here!” Kacchan shouts as he continues to drag Izuku further inside and into the living room.

Mitsuki’s head pokes around the kitchen wall, and her voice is scathing. “And you didn’t even invite the other two in? They’re standing at the door, you brat! Didn’t I teach you manners?”

Masaru comes down the stairs at the same time that Mitsuki rushes to greet Aizawa and Yamada, who are still waiting out on the steps—Aizawa with a blank expression and Yamada with a comforting one.

In Yamada’s hand is a small gift basket filled with fruits and other things, as he claimed it was only custom to bring something along to your first dinner as a guest in someone else’s home.

While the Bakugous welcome them in properly, Izuku scrambles to get out of Kacchan’s chokehold. He scrabbles against his arms and then promptly kicks his friend in the groin. He’s let free, as expected, and Izuku grins brightly up at him, triumphant. “Miss me that much? It’s only been, what, a few hours?”

“You were almost late,” Kacchan complains.

“I made it here in record time,” Izuku defends hotly. “Give me credit where credit is due, Kacchan. I’m usually late by, like, four hours. This is an improvement! Besides, I wasn’t the one in charge of driving here.”

Before Kacchan can respond, Mitsuki comes back around and makes a beeline for Izuku. She pulls him close and hugs him tight, lifting him off the floor for just a second. “Heya, kiddo. You haven’t visited here in a bit! What’ve you been up to?” She presses her lips against his forehead in a loud, obnoxious kiss, and Izuku turns beet red. He doesn’t get a chance to say anything, though, as immediately afterwards she lets out a gasp and sets him down to marvel at his hair, one hand on her chin. “Oh, your hair’s grown so long! And it feels so soft, too! I don’t think your curls have ever been this defined before. What changed?”

She works her fingers through his hair, looking inspired for some reason, and Izuku has to fight against every bone in his being not to melt into her touch. Instead, he screws up his face and tries to wiggle away from her, aware of both Aizawa and Yamada watching them both. But then Masaru appears beside him and gives him a comforting pat on the back.

“Happy you’re here, son.” He puts a hand in front of his mouth then, whispering to Izuku. “I mean it. You’ve been worrying Mitsuki sick the last few weeks.”

Izuku looks away and rubs the back of his neck, chuckling nervously. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

Masaru only smiles. “Don’t worry about it. You’re here now, aren’t you?” He turns back to the two guests with inviting arms. “We’ve got a few minutes until the food is ready, so please make yourselves at home!”

“Hell yeah!” Mitsuki encourages, never one to hide her brashness when she’s in her own home. “Would any of ya care for some drinks? I have some fruit and vegetable platters too for snacks.”

Izuku perks up at the mention of the fruit platter. He tears those fuckers up every time Mitsuki makes them; they just hit that differently for him. Plus, he hasn’t eaten anything since lunch, so he’s pretty starved. He brushes past Yamada on the way to the kitchen, his vision narrowed on the platter. He’s so focused on his new mission that he doesn’t even notice Kacchan has followed him until the boy is grabbing him yet again and yanking him out of the kitchen and into the hallway off to the side.

Izuku drops the perfectly cut and washed strawberry he picked up because of this, and horror fills his veins as he watches it hit the floor.

“Jerk!” Izuku snaps, slapping Kacchan’s shoulder. When he’s sure Auntie isn’t looking, he uses Pull to bring the strawberry with him up the stairs, and by the time Izuku is being shoved into Kacchan’s bedroom, the strawberry has already been eaten.

And, fuck, was it *sweet.* Izuku loves strawberries even more whenever he’s at the Bakugou household. He doesn’t know why, and frankly he doesn’t care.

Kacchan kicks the door shut and locks it, which prompts Mitsuki to bark at him from down the stairs about slamming things again, which Katsuki promptly responds to with a shouted *shut up, you hag!*

Izuku, who is currently sprawled out on his friend’s luxurious, silk bed, props himself up on his elbows. “You really shouldn’t disrespect her like that, especially when Aizawa and Yama are over. Makes her look bad, Kacchan.”

“She doesn’t need me to make her look bad,” Kacchan snarls, turning on him. He rummages through his dresser for something before seeming to get too frustrated to continue. He goes inside his closet next, his brows furrowed together in that way that tells Izuku he’s thinking long and hard about something.

He’s determined. That much is clear.

“You’re mean,” Izuku says with a roll of his eyes. “Would it kill you to be nicer to her?”

“I am nice to her,” Kacchan seethes.

“And Endeavor is the number one hero.”

Kacchan twists on his heel, his entire body glowing for a fraction of a second as his quirk lights up his arm. The object in his hand is sent shooting towards Izuku, and the boy catches it without so much as a blink of the eye.

He rolls his old Rabbit ring between his fingers, his next words dying in his throat before he can let them out. It looks the same as it did the day Izuku gave it to his friend, and he’s almost surprised the blond actually kept it.

With an odd sense of sadness overcoming Izuku, the boy slips it onto his finger just for a moment, noting how the quirk suppressor he built into it doesn’t even work anymore. Izuku has grown so strong that it

does practically nothing for him.

It's eye opening to even think about.

He looks back up at Kacchan, confused, and finds him with his arms crossed and face set as he stands in front of the bed. "Spill," his friend demands, and Izuku's stomach churns.

Obviously, he knows what he's asking.

He swallows. "Are you giving this back to me?" He asks instead, flashing him the ring.

"No," Kacchan says shortly. "I just figured reminding you of how far we've come would stop you from trying to lie to my face again, you shithead."

The sheer venom in his words takes Izuku aback. How far *we've* come, he said. We.

The green-haired boy sits up on the bed, sighing. "Kacchan, please."

"We're not doing that this time. You only told me about a few things that happened during Hosu, but you never told me everything, and you also never said how bad it was. So fucking tell me. Now."

Izuku sets the ring on the nightstand, not wanting to touch it for any longer than he already has. "You saw the video. What else is there to say?"

Kacchan stalks around the side of the bed to get closer, and Izuku instinctively straightens up a little. He hates their size difference when they're arguing like this. Kacchan has always made him feel smaller in every way. "How about you start from the beginning. You told me you fought more than one Nomu. What were the others like?"

"Can we save this for over text, p—"

"If you try to get out of this again, I might just beat the shit out of you, Deku. I don't care if Aizawa-sensei's here or not." Kacchan's face is so close to him now. His eyes bore into Izuku's, and Izuku holds the gaze with a tingling sensation zipping across his skin. "I *deserve* to know, dammit! You said you'd tell me."

"I'm not telling you everything about what happened before the video. It's a long story, and we don't have time. Besides, they might hear us

—”

“Then tell me about what happened after it was cut off.”

A defensive fire coats Izuku’s insides. Jesus, his friend just never listens, does he? “Why don’t you take a good guess, Kacchan, and we'll see if you’re close or—”

Kacchan’s hand grips Izuku’s shirt again, but he doesn’t pull this time around; he only holds. Izuku isn’t sure if it’s a possessive thing or if he’s doing it just to calm himself. It could be both.

“You’ve had this awful fucking look on your face ever since that night. You try to hide it, you try to hide just how much it’s affecting you, and while it might work on everyone else, it doesn’t work on me. You’re a shit liar.” His breath is hot and smells minty. Izuku can only continue holding his gaze. “I know something happened after that Nomu killed Native. I can see it on your goddamn face, so don’t *tell* me it’s nothing.”

The speed at which the tone of the room shifted has Izuku’s head spinning. It feels like when he was being carried through the air by sharp claws. The sudden pounding in his temples reminds him of how it felt to have wind pressing against his mind and body as he went higher and higher into the clouds.

Kacchan shakes him. “I see right through you, Deku.”

Izuku’s thoughts come to him in striking clarity at those words. He figures Kacchan is right—he knows he is. He does deserve to have a friend who’s honest and actually keeps his word, and Kacchan does genuinely deserve to know what happened.

Especially because of his relationship to the Nomu Izuku killed.

So the boy doesn’t dance around it anymore. He just wrenches Kacchan’s hand off of him and prepares to tell him the things he wishes he could’ve told Detective Tsukauchi.

Chapter End Notes

> everybody’s gotta go on, don’t they? so if you need a hero, just look in the mirror. no one’s gonna save you now, so you better save yourself
>
> mightve alrdy shared this one but I enjoy the song sex drugs etc

on yt. i feel like it rlly represents izuku's state of dissociation at times.

also I NEVER usually do this but have a second song rec!! if y'all can't tell, bakudeku holds a very dear place in my heart in this fic, and (similar to how I feel with shindeku) I think that if things were just a little different, they could've worked. they're made to be together but just not made to last :(i promise im trying by cavetown

izuku: i totally don't have multiple quirks see look
aizawa, eating his ice cream: yeah okay

this is not the end of the multiple quirks theory shenanigan thing! do not worry! aizawa is not stupid ☠

e

take care of things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yoichi stares into the void of the universe, and the void stares back.

This deep inside of Ninth's realm, there are no other vestiges besides Yoichi and Ninth himself. The other users never travel this far inside. They don't think they have to.

Granted, Yoichi traveled for years to get here. Years in the void are mere seconds outside of it, so he's never missed by the others. He can afford to make these endeavors.

It's all worth it in the end.

There isn't a ground floor like in the other sections of Ninth's realm. Instead, when Yoichi looks below himself, there are only distant galaxies and clusters of stars. It's trippy to just glance at, as it looks like he's floating through space. If Yoichi didn't already have literal years of experience inside this place, he'd probably be sick.

All around him, a beautiful and vast universe continues to grow and expand. Colorful nebulae and cloud-like structures glow and move around like waves in the ocean. Spiral galaxies move towards each other to see which will be consumed by the other first, and black holes can be seen farther out, probably acting as little tears on the universal level.

As Yoichi walks through both time and space, he comes closer to a star. He sweats, becoming hot all over, but he pays it no mind. The star is burning, and solar flares rise out of the ball of gas, but there's no sound.

There's absolutely no sound in this place, as vibrations can't travel here.

Ninth's vestige is a stickler to science.

Out of all ten realms inside One for All, Yoichi will argue that this one is the most gorgeous and well thought out. But it is also the most

dangerous. Why?

Because this is where Ninth spends most of his time when he's not out investigating. This is his—for lack of a better term—domain.

Yoichi finds him where he always is: in the middle of it all, this time overseeing the death of a star.

The cloudy vestige floats high above Yoichi and has his hands out, swishing them around with an almost musical cadence. It's as if he's a conductor of space activity.

Yoichi spares a moment to watch, as it never takes long for Ninth to notice him. He knows what happens next most times, but he still likes to give Ninth the benefit of the doubt to see if he'll change his mind.

Today is not one of those times, apparently.

Ninth rewinds the dazzling supernova with a flick of his wrist, and he holds it there, at the moment right before the first explosion happens. And then his head turns slowly, eyes glowing a blinding white. It spills from his eyes and leaks into the area around him, and his red aura grows bigger and more electric-like.

Yoichi thinks, not for the first or even the last time, that his nephew was born for greatness. Whether or not he wants it is another question entirely. But seeing him now, painted amongst a backdrop of stars and infinite time, Yoichi is reminded of why he never allows himself to smile.

He is the son of his brother in more ways than one. Well, what once was his brother, maybe.

Once upon a time, All for One was born for greatness too. It's just too bad he decided to choose the path of greed and control.

Ninth floats down to be level with Yoichi, but his hand is still up, this time forcing the supernova to occur at a much faster rate. He's speeding up time by light years.

He is stronger with each of Yoichi's visits. Each time he comes, he has to travel farther and farther to get to him. But that's perfectly alright; Yoichi is not worried. The more emotional that Ninth is in real life, the easier it is to get the best of his One for All vestige. So it happens like clockwork, really, as inside of Midoriya Izuku lies a vast expanse of anger and blinding, crippling fear.

The hard truth of it all is that Ninth never stays happy for long.

For Yoichi, however, this is fortunate, as this provides him with the knowledge of the best times to come searching. He has to take the path of least resistance if he wants to have hopes of succeeding in his adventures.

Abruptly, Ninth's hand stops its movements and instead faces the supernova, palm up and fingers twitching. And it's then that Yoichi sees his plan.

The dying star is pulled towards Ninth, and thus towards Yoichi. It doesn't seem like it's moving fast, but Yoichi has learned from his mistakes before. It is only due to the sheer size of the supernova that it looks to be moving slowly.

He tips his head and feels One for All rush all across his body in protection, burning at his skin. His quirk, his ability to pass something on, resides in every single user. It is the very *basis* of One for All.

So with each new holder, Yoichi has become stronger alongside them. Going through generations of growth has given Yoichi more strength than he knows what to do with while trapped in the clutches of death.

He raises his own palm against the vast force his nephew is about to send his way, and he doesn't blink. He just holds Ninth's gaze and waits for the supernova to get close.

And so, when the boiling heat has washed over him and the lights have framed Ninth's figure to the point where he's barely visible anymore, Yoichi sighs something sad and sends it all right back at him.

With nothing to cling to, Ninth can't hold it by himself, so he is sent far, far away—hundreds of years into the depths of the universe.

Yoichi walks for another period, hands in his pockets, staring at the wonders Ninth has crafted with such care, and finally finds a spot to sit down.

Midoriya Izuku's deepest memories aren't always dark or depressing. Some of them are great. Some of them are kind. And so it came as a great surprise to Yoichi the first time he arrived here and saw them all locked away and guarded here with his worst ones.

He presses his palms against a ball of light before him and wills these memories, locked so far inside Ninth's brain, to show themselves, to come to him. They're all somehow disguised as these miniature stars, but they melt and obey at his touch immediately, as if aching for someone to see, to acknowledge, to know.

The wisps of white and gold come to him like tiny ducklings following after their mother, and he dives in. He'll be safe to search for as long as he likes until Ninth finds his way back. And he always does—stronger and more desperate than before with an anger that puts even his father's to shame.

Eventually, Ninth will be too strong for Yoichi to keep pushing away. But that's alright too, because Yoichi has hope that things will be finished before that happens.

It'll be the only way they can win.

"I showed Aizawa my quirks last night."

"You already told me that," Kacchan says in annoyance. "'Sides, it's not like that changed anything. You're still lying to him, shitface."

"I think he already knows I didn't tell him everything," Izuku appeases, remembering the look on his teacher's face when he was explaining it all. "And could you keep it *down?"*

"Yeah, of course he knows," Kacchan says, ignoring his last complaint completely. "Didja think he was stupid or something?" He uncrosses his arms suddenly and jabs a finger in Izuku's face. "Oi, stay on task! If you keep avoiding my question I'm dragging your ass downstairs and telling Auntie."

Izuku bristles, the sheets beneath him feeling wrong against his skin. The sound of Kacchan's television in the corner of the room just makes him itch more. "You'll tell her what, exactly?"

"Rabbit. *Everything."*

Izuku's eyes grow sharp, and he shoves Kacchan back so he can stand up from the bed. There's a bitter taste in his mouth that covers up the sweetness of the strawberry. "You shouldn't even threaten something like that."

"What, you don't think I'll do it?" Kacchan grabs his shoulder, and Izuku slaps his hand off.

"No, I don't. You've been saying it nonstop ever since the USJ, and have you done it yet? No. You never will."

Kacchan barks out a sharp, cruel laugh, and then he's walking past Izuku to the door. Izuku should've known better to say something like that, as he's well aware that Kacchan is never one to back down from that sort of challenge. It's this reminder that has Izuku's eyes widening and his body going rigid.

Pull is activated before he even has to call on it, and Kacchan's arm is yanked back from the door handle before he can touch it. The blond's head snaps to Izuku, and there's a deep fire in those eyes now that makes Izuku falter for just a moment.

"The *fuck* was *that?"* Kacchan hisses, slow and dark and threatening. He spins on his heel, stalking back towards him. "What makes you think you've got *any* right to use that damn quirk on me like that?"

"Since you became such a jerk," Izuku replies quickly, breathless.

Kacchan crosses the distance between them in three easy strides, and Izuku is crowded up against the dresser now, his back pressed into the corners of the wood. *"I'm* a jerk?" His friend scoffs. "Sometimes I wish you'd see how you're actually acting, Deku."

Izuku clenches his fists. Pull's residue burns at his fingertips like the aftermath of poison. "If you'd give me just a *second* to say my shit, you wouldn't have to get all huffy and puffy."

"Speak faster then, or I'll blow your ass up right here, right now."

Izuku pushes his face forward so he's only centimeters away from Kacchan, feeling more courageous than he's been in a while. He was already planning on telling Kacchan, truthfully, but now he's curious as to why the blond is so dead set on knowing everything. *Why* does he care this much? Is it really affecting him this badly?

Kacchan has always been nosy, at least when it comes to Izuku, but

why is he so angry right now? He's fired up enough to be towering over Izuku and pressing him against his dresser. And if he's willing to threaten to tell Auntie everything he knows even with both Aizawa and Yamada here too?

Something must have changed. Something big.

Maybe Izuku can get some answers out of this, too. He'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way—by putting his ass out on the wire.

He grits his teeth and holds his dark gaze, making sure Kacchan hears every enunciated word. "All. Bark. No. *Bite.*"

No sooner has the last word left his mouth than Kacchan is yanking him away from the dresser. Izuku doesn't wait to see what he'll do next—he doesn't want to wait. So, naturally, he strikes first.

Izuku juts his foot out to trip Kacchan, and at the same moment he lets his hand fall at the back of the blond's neck, attempting to bring him to the floor. But Kacchan rights himself with a well-aimed miniature explosion and ends up elbowing Izuku in the face. The boy hisses and twists his entire body while on the tip of his toes, throwing a kick Kacchan's way.

It's easily caught, and Kacchan yanks Izuku closer by the ankle to pull him off balance. Aizawa has used this same move on Izuku before, however, *multiple* times, so the green-haired teen's counter this time around is almost instinctual.

He jumps up using his other leg so he's hanging midair and contorts his body quickly into a spiral, letting the back of his knee hook around Kacchan's neck. He swings his body around and sends Kacchan toppling to the floor. Izuku would've fallen into a neat roll had Kacchan not kept a tight grip on Izuku's waist, preventing him from detaching himself. Izuku is on top of him now, but only for a fraction of a moment.

Kacchan uses another explosion to force himself out from underneath Izuku, and he places another blast above him so he can drive Izuku into the carpet. With their positions suddenly switched, Izuku is more fired up than ever.

Kacchan's knees are on either side of Izuku, and he has a sparking palm raised threateningly. One for All cackles to life in response, dancing across Izuku's skin as he powers up and feels the new tension in his muscles.

Just when Izuku is about to send Kacchan flying across the room, Mitsuki's voice rings out from downstairs, her words traveling clearly despite the walls between them.

"What did I say about quirk usage in the house?" She shouts, making Izuku wince.

One for All fizzles out as the reality of where he's at and who he's with comes back to him. Kacchan growls audibly, teeth gritted, but his palms stop their sparking.

"Quiet, you hag!" He shouts back, shooting daggers with his eyes at the floor as if he can see her beneath it.

"You're lucky we've got guests, Katsuki!"

The empty threat does nothing to deter her son. "Like I care! Boss me around again and *I'll kill you!"*

Izuku glares at his friend and immediately makes to rebuke him, but Kacchan slaps his hand over his mouth before he can even get the first syllable out. He's still on top of Izuku, and half of his weight is pressing on Izuku's abdomen and hips.

"That!" Kacchan says, as if he's proven something. "That's exactly what I'm talking about!"

Izuku raises a brow. "What?" He asks, muffled by the hand on his mouth. He could lick the hand to try and get Kacchan off of him, but the blond is exceptionally sweaty right now, so Izuku doesn't want to.

"That dumbass look on your face."

"I always look like this."

"Don't be dense!" Kacchan spits. He grabs Izuku's face and manhandles him, pulling at his skin and making the boy squirm around in annoyance. "You look stupid!"

Izuku kicks him off of him after finally having enough and sits up so he's sitting criss-crossed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Just forget it!" Kacchan turns away and matches his pose, eyes twitching and shoulder muscles flexing. He mutters darkly under his breath and grinds his teeth, and his appearance suddenly resembles that of the bridge troll Izuku had a dream about the other night. The

troll forced him to solve three riddles before he could pass by, and Izuku remembers being so baffled by it that he ended up speaking in riddles too in order to confuse the troll and sneak past.

Huh. Maybe Izuku has more issues than he previously thought.

Well, that was anticlimactic, Banjou comments. *Thought there'd be more action there. What a let-down.*

Shinomori responds before Izuku can get a chance. *Did you really want them to fight each other honestly? I don't think now would've been a good time or place.*

Agreed, Shimura adds.

Banjou remains unconvinced. *It would've been funny, though. I think he —ow! Quit hitting me, woman! I was just joking!*

Izuku picks at a stray piece of carpet on the floor. It sticks out from the rest of the fabric, and Izuku doesn't like it. It irks him. So, he carefully tears it out and moves around the other pieces of the carpet to cover it up.

"Why haven't we been talking?" Kacchan asks, his back still facing Izuku.

The question takes Izuku by surprise, but he doesn't necessarily blame his friend; he knows what he's talking about. Sure, Izuku talks with Kacchan more than anyone else in his life right now, even his teachers, and he *lives* with them, for Christ's sake, but lately he hasn't really *spoken* to him.

While Izuku and Kacchan don't exactly have the best communication skills, they still usually make an effort to talk to each other. They don't outright state their emotions, of course, as that would be a symbol of unease and weakness on both sides, but they do acknowledge some of their thoughts and harder obstacles. They help each other most times, too. It's healthy, freeing, and natural to them for the most part.

So it's only fair that Kacchan is calling Izuku out on not holding up his side of their silent deal.

Kacchan is challenging Izuku's silence, and in doing so he's challenging their entire dynamic.

Izuku plays with the discarded pieces of carpet between his tingling fingers. “I don’t know.” In a much lower tone, he adds, “You’re angry at me.”

“I’m not angry at you, shithead.”

“You should be.”

Kacchan looks back, face shadowed. “Don’t be an idiot. It’s not like it’s your fault.”

It. Izuku wonders what exactly he’s referring to when he says that. *It* could refer to a lot of things: the Nomu, Native, Shigaraki, Stain, and so much more. What does he think is causing Izuku to pull away from him? Izuku wants to know, because if he hears Kacchan’s opinion on it, maybe he can personally understand it better.

Maybe Izuku can get the answer to that question too, because not even he knows it yet. He’s been searching for that answer.

“Then whose fault is it?” He counters, hearing the television return to the story every news channel has been falling back on for the past few days. They’re still talking about that damn video, about Native. God, do they really have nothing else to report? Izuku is getting so, so sick of hearing it. But then again, maybe it’s deserved on his end. His eyes flit to the dark window above Kacchan’s bed. “Who’s responsible for all this?” He continues, this time more to himself.

Kacchan angrily scoffs. “No one,” he growls, but he can’t look Izuku in the eye. “Shit just happens.”

And doesn't it? Fuck, Izuku wants that written on his tombstone. He needs it branded on his skin. That way whenever someone questions his actions or asks him something, he can just hit them with the old *it is what it is.*

Yagi might look at him one day and ask why Izuku ever thought becoming his successor was a good idea, and Izuku will only be able to say *well, shit just happened. I wasn’t planning on it either.*

Aizawa will ask why he keeps trying so hard to hang onto his name, onto his vigilantism, and Izuku will shrug and say that he has to be prepared for anything, because *shit just happens sometimes, y’know?*

Maybe this will be Izuku’s new catchphrase. He can put this on his new calling cards just to irritate the heroes further.

It's a thought that the *old* Izuku would've entertained—annoying, immature twelve-year-old Izuku who was still polishing off his newly found abandoned apartment. It's something that *that* Izuku would've done. But the Izuku *now?*

The one who's drained of most outward emotion nowadays and is more obedient than he's ever been before?

It's not logical or feasible. Izuku thinks he should keep these immature ideas inside and lock them away. It'll be better that way. More realistic. He says it'll be more realistic because he knows that if All Might or Aizawa actually asked him those questions now, he very well might just break down and not want to speak at all. There'd be no room for snark.

Not anymore. Not ever.

"Kacchan," he begins, his words hanging heavy in the warm air. "Do you remember… that boy back in elementary school? The one that would make fun of me sometimes."

Kacchan grips his pants. His knuckles turn white, and Izuku pauses to gauge his reaction. He knows this is a sore spot—he knows that Kacchan doesn't want anything to do with those boys back at their old school—but Izuku just has to get this out. He needs to.

"He had… red wings. Tan. Kinda stocky. Freckles." Izuku scratches the scar running along his jaw. "He, um, always wore that wife beater shirt, even to school."

"Tsubasa," Kacchan says abruptly, as sure as the sunrise each morning.

"Yeah," Izuku affirms, soft and quiet and regretful. "I think… Kacchan, I think that…"

"Spit it out."

Izuku presses his aching palms against his face and uses the pressure to ground himself. "I told you before that Nomu are made from the quirks of living people. Of… corpses, actually. They, um, use them as bases to build upon or alter. It's easier that way. When the brains are still intact, I mean. And when the person's personality may still be there."

Kacchan's blond brows are furrowed, and there's a growing look of

suspicion on his face that betrays his next curious prompt. “What are you saying?”

Izuku swallows. “The Nomu that killed Native. The one that… I killed. It…” He drags his fists down his skin, wishing he had a mirror close by to see the red marks left behind. “It looked like him. His quirk—I could feel it in there as clear as the first time I sensed it inside him after Extract manifested. It felt just like him. And—and the *eyes,* Kacchan, they were…” Izuku shivers, his hair rising. “I looked into it after Hosu because I was confused. I—I didn’t want to believe it. And wouldn’t you know…” He thinks of the records and police reports still saved on his phone. “Tsubasa’s been missing for several months. Ever since the last school year.”

When Izuku looks up, Kacchan’s eyes are blown wide, and his lips are parted once more. Horror stretches across his expression, and it leaks into the air around Izuku.

It seems Kacchan is putting it together rather quickly.

“The Nomu I killed wasn’t fully complete. Meaning the time frames match up.” Izuku lifts a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “It was him. I know it was.”

Kacchan can only stare, devastated, when Izuku finishes dropping the latest bomb. He seems to look not at Izuku but straight past him, hearing and seeing things Izuku cannot. Or maybe things he once did but chooses to block out.

Unable to deal with the stunned silence any longer, Izuku presses on with a newfound fervor. Now that the bandage is off, he wants to itch at the wounds. “I took the quirk, Kacchan. Tsubasa’s. And it killed him. If I didn’t… I don’t even know what would’ve happened. It probably would’ve torn my head off and dragged me somewhere far away, back to *him,* I don’t know, but…” Izuku presents Kacchan with his palms, all red and scarred with those same gaping holes marking the entrance to Extract’s power. *“I… have… it.”*

Kacchan’s throat moves when he swallows silently, and Izuku sees the way his body starts to contort in on itself as he stares down at where Izuku lets his hands drop. He’s quiet, and it’s not usually like him. Izuku hates it. Hates the way Kacchan can just never let things be. Hates how much his friend pushes him.

But maybe that’s also why Izuku loves him so much, as selfish as it is.

“Tsubasa’s was a mutant quirk,” Kacchan manages to get out eventually, voice scratchy and raw.

“I know. I know. That’s why you can’t see them, but—but *I* do. I see them. Every time I pass by a mirror, every time I’m dreaming. They’re there, and I—I see him, too. All around me. And just *what if?”* Izuku’s words get higher the more his emotions reel their angry heads at him. “I’m scared, Kacchan. What if they come in? The wings? How am I going to explain that? How—how could I even begin to explain it? I can't live with his wings on my back. I can’t. It’s not right.” Izuku grips his own shirt and pulls, needing the pressure again, needing to remind himself that the wings aren’t there, that he can feel the fabric of his shirt stretched across every inch of his skin. “I killed him.”

“Deku.”

“I killed Tsubasa. With—with my silence. With my… my fear. I felt him die when I took that quirk, and I’m not sure what I’m going to do now. I keep thinking to myself that if I had only told people what the doctor was always planning to do with those Nomu, and how he was going to achieve his goals… maybe the heroes would’ve been able to plan against it. Maybe the other people All for One killed would still be alive. And they wouldn’t be trapped in those fucking vessels.” The dam has cracked, and Izuku can’t stop. He’s cold all over now, and funnily enough it feels like only Kacchan’s heat will be enough to help him this time. He continues hoarsely, barely able to muster a normal volume anymore. “I feel them on me all the time. Whenever that stupid back cream wears off and I’m not numb anymore. Kacchan, I know it should be impossible, but what if I wake up and they’re—they’re there? What if they just—”

Kacchan moves forward suddenly. “Turn around.”

Izuku blinks. “Wh—”

“Turn around!” Kacchan doesn’t give him a chance to do it this time; he shoves Izuku’s shoulder and forces him to lose his balance. Izuku lands on his side on the carpet, too shocked to counter it, and chokes when Kacchan pushes him again so he’s on his stomach. He attempts to sit up on his elbows, but then warm hands are pressing between Izuku’s shoulder blades through the shirt and feeling the area there.

“Ka—!” Izuku cuts himself off when the hand moves down to slip up his shirt. Izuku is quiet, deciding to just stare the wall while he wonders what the fuck is happening. Honestly, he shouldn’t be too

surprised by these weird antics by now.

Kacchan points at two spots on Izuku's upper back. "Tsubasa's wings protruded from these points." Warm fingers drag across Izuku's shoulder blades. "If the skin hasn't broken or gotten textured by now, they're not coming in, Deku. They're not going to appear. It's been *how* long? You would've gotten them by now if they were coming.

Izuku's breath shudders. "But—but still. What if they *do* come in? Later?"

"Then you can fucking fly. That's all there is to it."

"What would they *say—?"*

"Who gives a shit!" Kacchan moves away and pulls his hands back, allowing Izuku's shirt to fall back into place. "We'd make something up! Don't be dramatic!"

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut and moves back to his sitting position. He wipes his face, cringing at the cold sweat. Kacchan jabs a finger in the middle of his chest.

"Hey," he demands. *"Hey."*

Izuku looks into those dark crimson eyes he loves so much. He sometimes forgets how beautiful they are, but it only takes one glance to remind him again. Those eyes are just as vast as his friend's mind.

"We wouldn't let them touch you," Kacchan says, like it's a fact, like he doesn't know why Izuku is worried about it in the first place. And Kacchan's easy confidence smooths over his worries better than anything anyone else has ever said to him before.

Izuku nods once, then twice, and he finds it difficult to speak. "Yeah," he lands on, voice scratchy. "Yeah, that's…"

Kacchan just rolls his eyes, but there's no anger in his expression—only something darker that's always present on his face, something that Izuku subconsciously searches for in every person he meets. "You're doing it again. That face."

"I can't help it." Izuku glances around the room again to find something else to focus on. Maybe that'll help get rid of whatever look Kacchan claims is on his face.

“Yeah, well, learn to help it, because you’re not going back down there until you’re normal again.” Kacchan turns off the television and walks across the room to rifle in his dresser, this time for a different reason. After a second he throws a maroon sweater at Izuku, who lets it cover his face for a moment before dropping into his lap. “Your shirt looks ugly. Take this one instead.”

“But Aizawa gave it to me,” Izuku says with a frown, fingering the new shirt he was handed.

“That only makes it more ugly. And you were probably too stupid to notice, but Mom nearly cried when she saw you. She thinks it’s ugly, too. Just trust me and wear the damn thing. *Anything* is better than what you have on.”

Damn. Izuku feels like he should be offended on Aizawa’s behalf but then comes to the conclusion that he’s too tired to really care. Nothing can sway Kacchan when his inner fashion designer is showing. He shucks off his jacket and then pulls his shirt over his head to put the new one on, making a mental note to not forget about it before he leaves.

Kacchan is standing at the door watching, his arms crossed and face screwed up. His foot is tapping impatiently, but the blond doesn’t speak or rush Izuku.

It’s a good thing, too, because Izuku’s body is suddenly sore despite not having done anything. The stress of having to reveal some of his more recent nightmares must’ve really fucked him up.

Another few moments pass, and Kacchan leans his head against the door. “You said you felt bad about keeping that shit quiet,” he says, low and not at all demanding. “So, when are you going to tell them?”

At this point in their conversation, Izuku doesn’t need to waste his breath asking what he’s referring to. He holds the shirt Aizawa gave him and sees the brand name on the collar. It has a number written on the tag in sharpie, and it’s clear Aizawa got it from a thrift shop a long time ago. Izuku only likes it more because of that, personally. “Soon,” he says, stopping himself from over-explaining or making any other excuse. He knows it wouldn’t do anyone good anymore. “I’m… I’m sorry, Kacchan. I’m trying. Really hard now.” He hears rain begin to pelt the ceiling above, and it distracts him for a moment. It’s so cold outside that Izuku is surprised it isn’t snowing instead. “I’ll tell them everything soon. I just have to take care of some things first.”

Kacchan accepts this response, but only for now—if the way his eyes narrow and his lips purse together are any indicator. He must figure Izuku looks more presentable now, as he gruffly jerks his head in the direction of the stairs. “C’mon, before the hag gets suspicious. I’ll show you the pie I made for dessert.”

“Is it cinnamon apple?” Izuku asks, perking up a little.

Kacchan sneers. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

And just from that response, Izuku knows it is.

“You’re supposed to be off tonight,” comes a voice behind Naomasa.

The detective sighs and turns around in his spinning chair. Sansa is leaning against the door, his furry arms folded. He looks the epitome of judgmental. They’ve been working together for so many years now that professionalism goes straight out the window when it’s just the two of them.

“I have catching up to do,” Naomasa replies, swiping a hand down his oily face. He hasn’t showered in a while but knows he needs to soon. “I can’t really afford vacations.”

Sansa’s large eyes drift over to Naomasa’s multiple stacks of paperwork and files. They take up a majority of his desk, and there are even more papers on the floor around him. “They act as if you’re the only detective in this entire city, huh?”

“Apparently I’m the most capable one at this time,” Naomasa answers, but he’s not proud or happy about it. “They’re giving me more assignments than I know what to do with.”

“Doesn’t make it any better that you’re working on personal cases, too.”

The words are blunt, but Sansa is never judgmental—only slightly disapproving. Naomasa turns back around and flicks a hand up in a *what can you do* gesture. “Yeah, well, my *personal* cases are important for the future of society. I have to direct my attention to them with every moment of free time I have.”

Sansa's chest rumbles with some kind of amusement, and he makes his way further inside the office. "That's exactly why you're named the top detective in this prefecture. You just don't quit, do you? You're determined, and the commissioners know it."

"Sometimes I wish they'd ask someone else to do their dirty work," Naomasa complains, striking out a line on his file and writing a correction above it. "But then I think about how badly things could turn out if someone who didn't know what they were doing tried to handle it by themself."

"Control freak," Sansa says with a roll of the eye, but there's no heat in it whatsoever. Even acting like this, Sansa is still so proper and careful.

Naomasa glances back at him once more, noting the way Sansa has a travel bag at his feet and is dressed in more casual clothes. "Speaking of assignments, are you about to head to your new one?"

"Yep. It's a four hour train ride to my next post." Sansa picks at a hangnail, not looking at him. "The city I'm being sent to is in rough shape. They're paranoid because of Hosu, and there have been some weird reports of more Nomu sightings, so I have to take an extended stay."

"How long will you be gone?"

"A few weeks, but a month at most depending on what we can find."

Naomasa shakes his head. "Can't believe they're taking you away from me for that long."

At this, Sansa smirks, his long whiskers twitching against his cheeks. "I'll be back before long, maybe with some more info that'll help you out with your cases. And anyway, I'll be just a phone call away."

"Be safe then," Naomasa directs, remembering the riots and protests he's seen going on in the news in neighboring districts. "For all we know, it could be a free-for-all over there."

"That's exactly why I'm going."

"Try to have enough fun for the both of us."

Sansa picks up his bag and prepares to leave. "I will."

Naomasa doesn't react to the lie, knowing that even the slightest unease or doubt in someone's mind will cause their words to register as one regardless of what it actually is. Besides, there's nothing fun or interesting about Sansa's newest assignment. He should be fine.

So Naomasa waves him goodbye after wishing him some more luck and turns his gaze to his monitor.

The video of the fight against Hero Killer: Stain and Native's death is shown, all zoomed in and saturated for the best viewing. He has markers all around the screen in each frame where his personal notes are, and, oh, he has a lot of them.

It's not that he's obsessed. No, no. The truth is that Tsukauchi Naomasa feels haunted.

He can tell a lie just by hearing a person speak. He can ruin so many famous people's lives by simply coming out and discrediting them online. He can tip all political scales in the span of an hour if he so wished. His quirk isn't a rare one, exactly, but it's sought for all the same.

Forty percent of people with lie detection quirks kill themselves by age twenty-five. It's a statistic that was drilled into Naomasa's mind by the time he was old enough to process it, mostly because he was scared out of his mind that his sister would become another one of those numbers. He tried his hardest to be there for his sister and use his power, which is similar to hers, only for good.

It was hard to block out all the unwanted lies and truths and whatnot as a teen, but he's learned to deal with it now. He doesn't fall into the trap of selling his services like others do, and he doesn't try to make himself out to be some kind of omniscient guy.

He helps where he knows he can: at a smaller level, making a big impact nonetheless.

These cases haunt Naomasa like how the moon lingers and haunts the sun in the early mornings. He has a duty to the people in Japan, to the people on this Earth, to create a safer environment for all individuals *regardless* of their quirk status or background.

The creation of the multiple quirked creatures known as Nomu breaks the balance that hero society has so desperately tried to uphold for the past century, and there's no telling what will come next. There are so many possibilities, so many vague clues, that nothing is out of the

realm of possibility.

But that's Naomasa's job, right? To account for those variables and plan accordingly. He is a detective, after all. He is also getting promoted soon, although he can't exactly say he's stoked about that.

Promotion means different areas of study. Different areas of study means that Naomasa's plans will have to be flexible and change along with him.

For now, though, Naomasa continues with what he knows he can do: analyzing footage.

He's watched this video around a hundred times now, but he's only more intrigued with each playback. He doesn't falter. He doesn't flinch. He doesn't allow his muscles to tense when Native dies again and again and again on the screen—he only watches.

He's familiar with these kinds of terrors by now. Besides, there's no use grieving forever over a hero who died exactly how he would've wanted to: saving lives.

When he can recall every detail of the footage even without his eyes open, Naomasa figures he's done enough. Rubbing his temples, he opens up a new tab and begins to type out an email. This one will be sent to two people.

Principal Nezu never sleeps, so Naomasa is expecting his reply in due time. He can't be so sure of the other, however. He's always a wild card.

It's been a while since Naomasa has contacted All Might's old friend.

Mitsuki and Yamada hit it off immediately, and Izuku is immensely grateful for that. Despite their fashion differences, the two have a lot in common, actually, and their personalities fit well together.

They're eating dinner for the first time together and it's already like they've been friends for years.

Izuku figures he should be a little uneasy about that, saying as Yamada is still a pro hero and could definitely nonchalantly ask some questions to get some information out of the Bakugou family, but interestingly enough, he's not scared at all. Not anymore.

There's still a little hole in his stomach from the conversation he had with Kacchan, but it's slowly repairing itself.

Aizawa, on the other hand, seems to like Masaru a good amount, all things considering. They're both even tempered and calm, and Masaru has just the right amount of aloofness so that he doesn't come off as a total fool. He appears only a little hesitant to people who don't know him, which is something Aizawa can definitely deal with.

They also have another blaring thing in common: they both have energetic blondes as partners.

So, while Yamada and Mitsuki continue talking about their opinions on the newest brand of jackets coming out, Aizawa makes small talk with Masaru.

Izuku is sitting next to Kacchan, feeling only a little awkward.

Dinner is delicious, not that Izuku thought it wouldn't be. In this house, there's no such thing as bad food. The fish is cooked exactly to Izuku's liking, and it's seasoned perfectly.

So, to avoid anyone asking Izuku questions or looking at him, the boy spends his time stuffing his face. He's grateful Masaru piled his plate up high—Izuku would've hesitated if he had to ask for more to make up for his enhanced metabolism.

This doesn't work forever, though, as soon Auntie is flashing Izuku a warm look after taking a bite of her food. "So, Izuku, when are you going to invite your new friends over? Katsuki tells me you have a whole group now."

Izuku feels his face begin to burn. He knows he shouldn't be embarrassed about Auntie sorta outing the fact that he was a loser and didn't have any other friends before UA, as his teachers already know this by now, but still.

He laughs nervously and gesticulates with his chopsticks—he was allowed *chopsticks* this time, hell yeah!—only to stop when he remembers it's considered rude, not that Auntie cares, he bets. "I'll invite them soon!" He assures. "There's just been a lot of stuff going

on, so it's kinda hard to find a day where we're all available."

Thankfully, he's not pressed with too many more questions. Aizawa and Yamada seem to be on their best behavior, too, as they haven't done one embarrassing thing yet!

When Izuku has gotten a little too bored, however, he fishes out his pocket knife which also doubles as a pen and sets up a game of tic tac toe on his napkin. Kacchan loves playing even though most of their games end up in draws. That's why Izuku usually ends up drawing random heroes on Kacchan's hands and forearms instead to pass time. He has Edgeshot and Mt. Lady inked onto the tan skin by the time his friend finally decides to pull away to get him to stop.

The rest of dinner goes by so smoothly and *easily* that Izuku should've known something would go awry. There always has to be *something.*

He can never have one moment of peace.

Mitsuki tells the guests about how she and Masaru designed the interior of the house by themselves, and of course this makes Yamada absolutely ecstatic! He gasps and grins widely, clasping his hands together.

"No, really? It all looks so rad! That's incredible!" He snaps his fingers and points to the hallway. "And I loved all the pictures you hung up! I'm trying to do the same thing at my house, you see, but I can never get the homely vibes quite right. I always make it feel cramped instead with all my pictures."

Aizawa subtly rolls his eyes at this, but no one acknowledges it.

Mitsuki waves the other blond off. "Nah, to hell with that! The more photos the better! Who cares if your shit is cramped or not? I can't bring myself to get rid of any of mine. I've got tens of thousands of 'em saved in my phone just to be safe; I never delete."

"It's true," Masaru says, staring into his plate and sounding exhausted. "She has way too many."

"There's never too many!" Mitsuki defends. "I've kept all our pictures since we first started dating. And I've even got Katsuki's baby stuff!" She shakes away the negativity and turns back to Yamada, lighting up. "Anyway, follow me and I'll show you more of the interior of the house. We've got some other photos hung up, too! Actually, most of them are of 'Zuku and Katsuki. You wanna see the one where they

both dressed up as All Might and won an imitation competition back when they were five?”

Izuku and Katsuki both stiffen at the long forgotten memory while Yamada snorts out a *sure!*

Masaru chokes, seeing the kids’ horror-filled faces, and attempts to do damage control. “Mitsuki, dear, I don’t think we need to—”

But his wife is already long gone with Yamada apologetically in tow. Aizawa stays at his place looking just as confused as Masaru is.

Katsuki is the first to jump up and stomp after his mother, though, with Izuku following quickly in suit.

Yeah, like hell he’s going to let Yamada see that! Absolutely fucking not! But of course Izuku is too late with his efforts.

Mitsuki is always right in the end, and she rarely ever loses—it’s just as Inko always used to say.

Chapter End Notes

> it’s raining. why is it still raining? i did what I was supposed to. that’s not fair.
>
> it’s u-cavetown (YouTube)
>
> hey y’all, sry this chapter is shorter than usual. just wanted to say thank you sm for all the support lately. this year has been hell and it’s only march. I’ve felt the most unmotivated I’ve ever been since I started this fic, but reading all of ur comments have really helped me. i know I don’t always reply to them but pls know I do read all of them and I love to hear from you guys!! srsly, y’all make this all worth it. anyway you know the drill by now!!□!!□ love yourself and love your friends and don’t forget to be vocal about it! stay goated 🐐🔥
>
> also if you’d like a visual on what izuku’s vestige was throwing at yoichi, look at this video on tiktok. If y’all can’t tell I adore space.
>
> v

lonely but not inside

Chapter Notes

> chap 75 🥺 I feel this is a milestone of sorts? we are 3/4ths of the way there. we can make it 🫵⏳

> lots of aizawa in this one bc im sad. probs won't be a lot of him in the next chaps so consider this a prepayment

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Many glands make up the endocrine system. The hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and pineal gland are in the brain. The thyroid and parathyroid…

Izuku's pen scratches against his wrinkled notebook paper. He spilled coffee on it earlier that morning during school, but he used a blow dryer (courtesy of Kayama) to quickly dry it off in the bathroom within minutes of it happening, so it's still usable.

He overheard Recovery Girl telling Aizawa that Izuku's hormones are out of balance, and that he may need to be prescribed another medication soon if things don't change since it might mess up how he's going through puberty. So, he's currently revisiting all the chapters of the Endocrine System in his stolen textbooks. It's not that he doesn't trust Recovery Girl (apparently she does have experience in endocrinology), it's just that he wants to know the exact details of what's wrong with him, and that means going back to the very basics of anatomy and physiology.

Right now he's reading a section on hormones in enhanced individuals. Maybe it can help him, or maybe it can't. Maybe it'll just make him paranoid.

The thyroid gland makes thyroid hormone, which controls growth and metabolism. If this gland doesn't make enough (a condition called hypothyroidism), everything happens more slowly. For example, heart rate might slow down. If it makes too much (hyperthyroidism), everything speeds up. The heart might race, and an individual might lose weight without trying…

"Kid, why are you on top of the fridge? It's midnight."

Izuku doesn't look at Aizawa, much preferring to stick to the shadows that are at the top of the refrigerator. "I'm reading."

“And you have to be on top of the fridge to read?”

“Yes.”

Aizawa thinks about this for a moment and then takes a sip from his mug. “What are you eating?”

Izuku pushes the jar in front of him so the man can more clearly see its contents from below. “Pickled okra.”

“Okra?” Aizawa asks, confused. “Where did you get them?”

“Ectoplasm. Said he pickled them himself. They’re spicy.”

“Naturally.” Aizawa doesn’t question it any further. “Can I ask you something?”

“Why would you ask me if you can ask something? That, like, defeats the purpose. You can ask. You don’t need to *ask* if you can ask. That’s weird.”

“I ask because I want to make sure you’re going to listen to me.”

Izuku fishes out another okra. He crunches on it and sucks out the juice. “Okay.”

“So, that’s a yes?”

Izuku nods.

Aizawa slowly tips his head to the side, still holding his steaming mug. Izuku wonders if it’s coffee or tea this time. “Hound Dog wants to reschedule your appointment soon. He wanted to ask if next Tuesday would work.”

Izuku pauses in his writing. He moves his pen around, watching the plastic cat on the top of the pen spin. “Do I still need to do it?”

Aizawa quirks a brow. “By law, the school is forced to assign you a mandatory session. It’s just protocol after what happened at Hosu. Again, you don’t have to stay for the full time, but you do have to go.”

The fluffy universe socks on his feet suddenly become very interesting to Izuku. He studies them, wiggling his toes around to calm his nerves as best he can. He’s grateful once more that Aizawa can’t see his face really well this far back against the wall. “Tuesday is okay.”

“You sure?”

Izuku lifts a shoulder half-heartedly. “I should get it out of the way, right?”

“You shouldn’t think of it like that,” Aizawa says in disapproval, “but if it helps, I guess so.”

Izuku doesn’t know what provokes him to say what he does next, but he finds himself speaking before he can think better of it. “You used to go to a therapist.”

Aizawa doesn’t take offense to the invasive prod. “I did. For a bit.”

“Were you in high school?”

“I started in my early twenties, actually.”

Izuku drags his gaze to look at his teacher’s face. “Why did you stop going?”

Aizawa thinks about this for a long moment. He swirls his mug. “I guess because I didn’t have anything left to say.”

“Oh.” Frowning, Izuku closes his notebook. He sets it off to the side and pulls his knees back up to his chest, pondering this. “Aizawa?”

“Mhm?” The man turns away and puts another tea bag in his mug.

Izuku’s words are barely more than a whisper. “If you had more to say now, would you go back?”

There’s no hesitation; the only thing hanging in the air now is honesty and burning curiosity. “Sure. But maybe for a different reason than when I first started.”

Izuku wants to ask why he began therapy in the first place and also if he went willingly, but he knows that he would be rude and so, so out of place. So, he pushes away those thoughts and instead focuses on another pressing issue. “Aizawa?” He asks again.

Sugar is dropped in the tea. “Yes, Izuku.”

“What if I get there and I don’t have anything to say to him?”

“Hound Dog?” At Izuku’s hum in affirmation, he goes on. “Well, you don’t have to talk about difficult things, you know. You can just talk

about simple stuff, like your friends, how your day went, what you had for breakfast, your hobbies, all of that."

"But he's going to ask me things."

"That's kinda his job, yeah."

"What if I can't answer them?"

Aizawa takes a long gulp from his cup. "Then don't."

Izuku doesn't like this answer. "But he'll just get mad after a while if I evade all his questions."

"He won't. But if you're still stuck on it, try to give yourself a goal."

Izuku scooches to the very edge of the fridge, and Aizawa stares up at him, most likely judging his mismatched clothes and appearance. "A goal?" Izuku repeats.

"Sure. Like, *I'll answer three hard questions this session."* Aizawa sets down his mug again and holds out an arm for Izuku to use. "Or *I'll talk about* this *thing today."*

Izuku hops down from the fridge with his pickled okra in hand and uses the man's arm to steady himself. He presses his cheek against the cool door and stares at his distorted reflection in it. "I don't want to talk about Hosu anymore."

"So pick something else." Aizawa jabs a finger in Izuku's forehead and pushes him back until he can open the fridge door. He then plucks the okra from Izuku's hands and places it on the shelf. "What's something you've been upset about recently?"

"Rabbit," Izuku says without hesitation.

Aizawa snorts. "Okay. Do that one."

Izuku nods sagely at this, now walking out of the kitchen and into the living room. He perches on the back of the couch, thinking hard, and begins to draft up potential conversations in his head.

He's met Hound Dog before, obviously, and he's not scared of him anymore, but he still isn't sure what the limits are to these sessions. Is it possible to be thrown out of one? Izuku figures that if it is possible he's definitely going to find a way to experience it even if he's not trying.

“Sensei,” Izuku says when Aizawa emerges from the kitchen.

“What?”

“It’s all confidential, right?”

“Unless you’re gonna tell him your plans for murder, yes, what you say is all kept between you and him.”

Izuku taps a finger on his chin. “So, if I wanted to talk shit about you to him for the entire duration, he wouldn’t be able to snitch?”

He gets a flat look in response. “You’re pushing it, kid.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

Aizawa pinches his ear hard as he walks past and easily moves away from Izuku’s annoyed swipe in retaliation. “Go to bed.”

When Aizawa disappears down the hallway with a pointed *good night* thrown over his shoulder, Izuku grumbles to himself and rubs his ear. He contends he’s still in the clear.

Operation: Gossip about Sensei #2 is a *go*.

There’s a bug on his neck.

Izuku stares at himself in the floor to ceiling mirror in the big gym nobody uses. He’s currently upside down and balancing on his forearms with around nine hundred pounds of weights stacked precariously on his feet. If he sways even a little bit, if he loses focus for half a second, it will all come crashing down on his head and most assuredly crack his skull.

But he’s not focused on that. He’s focused on his reflection.

He hates staring at himself. Especially these days. But right now, with his face beet red and his cheeks puffed out and a bug with way too many legs making a home on his skin, Izuku thinks he better pay attention.

“I’m going to kill myself,” he says aloud, his tone matter of fact.

No, you're not, En says. *Don't freak out; you'll hurt yourself.*

"I'm not freaking out. I'm really, really calm right now." He squints at the mirror, trying to figure out what type of bug it is. "How many legs is that? Ten?"

I count fourteen, Banjou replies helpfully.

It crawls further up Izuku's neck, stopping at where his compression shirt is. The feeling is indescribably creepy. It takes all of Izuku's willpower not to screech and run twenty miles away.

He bets Yamada would like this.

"Someone tell me what this is or I'm going to—"

That is a sowbug, Shinomori says, coming to the rescue. *A pretty large one, in fact. It's rare to see them here. Must've escaped from one of the insect classrooms in the general studies course, I imagine.*

This does not ease Izuku's fears, but thankfully the bug leaps off him (it can jump?) and scuttles away. It seems today is Izuku's extremely lucky day. It'll be the only one he gets for a while, actually.

"Wow, I handled that pretty well," he says, ignoring the snort Banjou makes in reply.

He continues to hold up the nine hundred pounds with relative ease, red electricity flowing steadily around him, and attempts to go back to his meditation. He's been trying to find a way to control his vestige in the One for All realm even while awake and conscious in the real world, but so far he's had little progress.

He can only walk a few steps forward before losing the connection. He sees mere glimpses of the vestige plane while awake, and it's not nearly enough to enable him to navigate it.

Izuku can sense certain things there, however. If he focuses hard enough, he can feel the other users walking past him or talking to themselves. He just can't make them out visually. And that is probably the most annoying thing ever.

He needs to be able to do more, and *fast.*

A voice sounds from the entrance to the gym. "What the fuck?"

Izuku hums, happy now. He was wondering how long it would take

Shinsou to finally speak from his place by the door. “About time, Shin Shin!” He calls. “I need help, and you’re exactly who I need right now.”

“What are you doing here?” Shinsou asks, walking towards him with a baffled look.

“Thinking,” he answers briskly. “Now, I need you to brainwash me!”

“You—” Shinsou’s mouth drops open when he registers what he said.

Izuku stares at him through the reflection. Shinsou’s cheeks are flushed red, and the color spreads to the rest of his skin. Lilac hair is pulled back into a ponytail, which puts more focus on his jawline and tight tank top. From this angle, Izuku can clearly see the abs poking through. It’s clear that Shinsou has been gaining muscle rather quickly. Aizawa’s training sessions must be paying off!

“Your quirk, Shinsou,” Izuku prompts, stopping himself from staring for too long. He’s been informed by Kacchan many times before that he can make people uneasy with his appreciative looks. “Use it on me, please!”

“But—but the weights! You’ll drop it all if I put you under!”

Oh, yeah. That is something that would happen.

Huh.

“Good point,” Izuku says. He carefully lowers himself to the ground, making sure to keep his excellent form, and presses his chest against the mats. The weights slide off him and onto the padding near perfectly, and when Izuku rolls to his feet, he notices Shinsou ogling at him. “What? Do I have something weird on my face?”

“No! I just—”

Izuku’s attention span drops immediately. “Actually, forget that. You know what’s going through my head right now, Shin?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Why am I not brainwashed yet?”

There’s another moment of stunned silence, but then the air shifts and Shinsou’s shock and confusion quickly morphs into irritation. The blush on his skin grows an even more furious red. “Are all hero students this entitled and demanding, or just you and that explosion dick?”

Bingo.

Izuku lets his head drop to the side and smiles warmly, his curls covering part of his eyes. “Well, not all of u—”

A hazy film slides over his vision, and in the next second, Izuku is back in the void. He’s on his knees now, panting, with pitch black water rippling beneath him. Glancing upwards, he sees the familiar night sky he’s come to associate with his vestige world.

His theory worked.

He’d need to conduct more trials to see if it’ll happen every time, but right now he’s under the assumption that if he focuses hard enough on his destination, he can be transported to this specific part of his mind. Shinsou’s use of Brainwash just made it a lot easier.

Now, all he has to do is learn how to do it *without* his help.

Izuku pushes himself to his feet and frowns. He can still see through his own eyes in the real world. In fact, he can see Shinsou moving towards him with something weirdly shiny in his eye, and he can hear the sound of his shoes hitting the polished floor clearly.

A small rush of wind hits Izuku’s back, and he lets out a satisfied breath. “So, this is how you guys see through me all the time?”

“Pretty much,” Shimura tells him, floating down to stand beside him. “Freaky, isn’t it?”

“Very, but also kinda cool.”

Izuku has to replicate this exact scenario but in reverse. He has to be the one in control on the outside and still be able to access the realm here. He needs to find that balance on both sides. He has to have *this* feeling that he has in his chest right now. That’s the only way he can achieve this.

Since he has a better plan than before, Izuku just has to keep practicing. Now, to get out of here…

“Can you move around?” Shimura asks, hands on her hips. She’s watching the feed just as Izuku is.

“No. When he has you under Brainwash, you can’t do anything unless he allows it. Most people don’t remember a thing that’s happened

while under his control, but my situation is kinda different than before considering that now I have access to this realm and can…" He gestures to the very real and very live broadcast of Physical Plane Izuku's vision and shrugs. "Anyway, his quirk makes me feel good. *Really* good. Makes me feel all warm. I want him to do this to me more often."

Shimura shivers. "Sometimes, kiddo, you don't have to tell me everything you think."

Instead of replying verbally, Izuku only nods in understanding. He's not exactly sure why his comments this time made her cringe, but he doesn't have the brainpower to care at the moment.

Without thinking of the consequences, Izuku puts a hand on his neck and summons Force to the forefront of his mind. All at once, his quirks activate, thrumming to life with a vibrancy that matches this realm's endless energy.

There's a sharp pain at the base of Izuku's skull, and for half a second he can see his One for All vestige materializing before him with wild eyes—but then he's falling backward and the black sludge is swallowing him whole.

Surprisingly, he isn't actually on the floor when he gains back control of his body. He's still standing in the exact spot he was in before being brainwashed, and Shinsou is staring at him with wide eyes and an open mouth. "You—you just—you just *broke out of my quirk?"*

Izuku shakes himself, still hanging onto that weightless feeling in his gut that Brainwash gives him. Honestly, he didn't think that would work. He was just testing how real his Extract form is compared to his One for All form. "Well, that was weird! Thanks, Shin Shin! You're great." Izuku steps closer to him upon noticing the expression on his face. "You look a little pale; what's wrong? Sick? Nervous? Constipated? I have some medicine for that. Oh, wait, I probably shouldn't give you any of *my* medicine. It would kill you. Or worse, make you really, *really* high. Like, *I'm going to be twitching for three days* kinda high." He brightens up. "Come to think of it, I could be a really successful drug dealer! What do you think?"

Shinsou only stares, baffled and disgusted. It's then that Izuku realizes he should really reel himself in now—he needs to remember to mask his weirder habits and thought processes or else people will isolate him again.

“Er, nevermind. I'll leave you be now, because I’m sure you’re here to train.” Izuku walks past Shinsou and throws a wink over his shoulder. “You’ll want to practice a lot with your new capture weapon. Don’t panic, but I heard from a little birdie that soon Aizawa is gonna ask you to fight him. Like, for real. And trust me, as someone who’s gotten his ass kicked by Sensei like four hundred times, you’ll wanna be extra prepared for spars with him. Disarm him first—and I don’t just mean his scarf.”

By the time Shinsou recovers from his stupor and calls out Izuku’s name in question, no doubt to ask him what he means, the green-haired boy is already long gone.

“Why are you pouting?”

“I’m not pouting.”

“Yes, you are.” Aizawa makes a correction on the test before him. Izuku is too far away to see the name on it, but he bets it belongs to one of the third years. “What’s up?”

“I’m…” Izuku trails off and grunts in mild irritation. He kicks out a leg and counts how many wrinkles pop up on his pants due to the action. He’s currently perched on top of a filing cabinet in the near empty teacher's lounge, and in his hands he’s fiddling with one of Kayama’s brand new pairs of tinted glasses. “Angry.”

Aizawa doesn’t look at him. He’s the only one still in here; the other teachers went to either their classrooms or to the cafeteria. “Why?”

“I have an idea for a new invention,” Izuku tells him, chewing on his bottom lip.

“Okay. How is that upsetting?”

“Nezu won’t let me into the lab to start on it.”

Aizawa’s pen pauses for just a moment. “Oh, yeah, you’re on restriction, right?”

Izuku sets down Kayama’s glasses and hides his face in his hands.

“Yes. He banned me from using it, and it’s—it just sucks. When I have an idea, I need to physically get it out and make it. If I can’t try it immediately, I get bored with it and end up forgetting it.”

He gets a grunt in reply. “Can’t help much with that. Take a nap.”

“A nap?” Izuku asks incredulously.

“Sure. Naps make you less angry.”

“Only if you’re five,” Izuku says, more factually than snidely. “Though I guess that explains something coming out of you.”

A pen is immediately launched his way, and Izuku ducks so it narrowly avoids hitting him. His patience already running thin, Izuku sends his teacher two middle fingers.

Aizawa doesn’t even have to look back to see what he’s doing—he can probably just feel that Izuku’s vibes turned rancid. “See? Grouchy.” He points behind him to the couch. “Nap. I’ll make sure no one bothers you.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. It’s an outrageous idea, honestly. He’s not so childish that he needs an afternoon nap. And he’s also not grouchy. If anything, Principal Nezu is the one who needs to stop being so bitchy and unfair. Maybe Izuku should go tell *him* right now that he needs to take a nap.

But would that make Nezu ground Izuku from the lab even longer?

Chewing over this, Izuku bunches his muscles and leaps toward the vent hatch in the middle of the ceiling. He grabs onto it and yanks it down, planning to start his evening vent inspection. He needs to run through his territory every so often so none of the other vent inhabitants get any ideas.

But before Izuku can slip inside, the hatch slams back against the ceiling with an electric hum and nearly cuts off his fingers. With an undignified squeak, Izuku falls down onto the couch and throws a glare back at Aizawa, who is pulling his hand away from a button on the side of his desk.

“Sorry,” Aizawa says, sounding anything but. “I was just testing this out.”

“Really?” Izuku says flatly. “When was *that* installed?”

“Today.”

Izuku huffs, but he doesn’t have any smart comments to say back, so he just resigns to his fate and sinks into the couch cushions. Maybe he is a little tired. He’s been visiting One for All so much in his dreams now that he finds himself not feeling any more rested upon waking up. It turns out that training while inside the realms *still* drains his energy, just not as much as it normally would in real life.

Plus, he looks the trashiest he’s ever been, and that’s saying something. But he’d still like to think he’s premium trash. The trash you find in dumpsters outside of luxury stores and restaurants. The trash that makes you question if it should be recycled instead. *That* kind of trash.

Izuku drops his face into the armchair, deciding he can suffocate today without consequence.

And, much to Aizawa’s smugness, Izuku is out like a light.

“Did you find him yet?”

Shouta blinks, still holding up his glass cup filled halfway with freshly-squeezed orange juice. Mrs. Bakugou was adamant that he try it despite it not exactly being an appropriate time.

They’re all in the living room after having dinner, and Shouta is sitting by the coffee table with his legs folded politely beneath himself. The boys are upstairs again, roughhousing by the sounds of it.

Shouta wonders if his students feel uncomfortable by the idea of having to sit and hold a conversation with everyone. He knows from experience how awkward teacher-parent meetings can be to children, and this is no doubt even worse considering this is a more informal occasion.

Mrs. Bakugou’s nonchalant tone doesn’t exactly make things better. Her question sounded like she was just mentioning the weather.

Hizashi is just as confused from his place adjacent to Shouta. A crease forms between his blond brows. “Er, did we find who?”

Mr. Bakugou clears his throat from where he's finishing cleaning the dining room—he had rejected all the offers of help from their guests. "Mitsuki," he says in slight worry, seeming to sense an impending storm.

Mrs. Bakugou isn't fazed. "Izuku's father, of course."

Now, Shouta can admit that he was expecting a lot of things tonight. He had quite a few conversational flow charts set up in his mind while on the way here, so he was pretty prepared for even the most dastardly question, but this? Maybe he's getting off his game.

He should've known better. Bakugou Mitsuki is certainly a character.

Hizashi coughs into his cup and quickly turns to his sleeve. Shouta, meanwhile, only brings his own cup to his lips for another sip.

Maybe he should've denied this dinner. Would've given him some extra time to sleep before patrol, that's for sure.

Hizashi glances at Shouta, completely flushed, and then returns his gaze to Mrs. Bakugou. "I'm not sure what you—"

"Oh, please, you both are heroes, yea? You've gotta be damn good if you're teaching at UA. You must've noticed how bad Izuku is at lying! Honestly, it's a wonder none of this came out sooner."

Shouta stares at her, mildly perplexed. He can't help but be a little put off. Worry settles in the pit of his stomach, making his grip tighten on the glass. Just how much does she know?

Hizashi straightens up. "Ah, I assure you, the listener—"

Mrs. Bakugou isn't finished. "That bastard of a man can't be on a business trip every second of every day. He avoids Izuku on purpose, clearly! It's fucking criminal is what it is. Neglectful!" She swishes her drink around in her hand, her eyes flinty. "Izuku is alone in that house more often than he isn't, and I only wish that boy would realize how terrible he gets treated. It's just not right!"

"Honey, please," Mr. Bakugou cuts in quickly, making his way into the living space with a dish towel in hand. "This isn't the time nor the place. You cannot expect them to tell you anything about what they're doing, especially since we legally have no claims in his life. It's not—"

"Actually," Shouta starts neutrally, "that's not exactly true."

Hizashi flashes his husband a look that clearly says 'what the fuck are you doing,' but it's ignored.

Mrs. Bakugou perks up immediately. "See? What did I tell you! It is our business. He's our nephew, Masaru! We've been around him long enough, and I've also got Inko's writing from years ago!" She smiles triumphantly at Shouta. "All I'm sayin' is that I doubt UA wouldn't have noticed the obvious neglect. So, I'm only wondering if any of you have had any luck in reaching Hisashi, 'cause God knows we haven't been able to. Not for seven years!"

Seven? Shouta files that back in his mind, already formulating the makeshift timeline in his head. Just from what he's hearing, it doesn't seem like Mrs. Bakugou knows Izuku has been homeless for a few years. She stills seems to be under the impression Izuku was living in the house Hisashi provided.

Still alone, in all regards, but not homeless.

Hizashi is now bug eyed, obviously unsure of how to proceed since he has no doubt come to the same conclusion Shouta has. They have a choice here: they can betray Izuku's trust and open up more about what is actually going on, or they can tell her only the things she needs to know and risk getting on her shit list later when things eventually come out.

Normally, Shouta wouldn't care about how other people perceive him, but this is a more fragile situation. These two people are the closest thing to Izuku's remaining family—he can't risk burning that bridge.

"No, ma'am," he says quietly, all too aware of Izuku's enhanced hearing. "Unfortunately, we haven't been able to reach him even with our extensive resources."

Mrs. Bakugou's eyes narrow. "Is there a warrant out for him now?"

Hizashi finds his voice quickly. "It's a little complicated, but yes. The thing that makes this difficult is that he could be anywhere in America, Japan, and even the rest of the world for all we know. Getting warrants out to that extent is… hard."

Nearly impossible, Shouta thinks, even with someone like Nezu on their side.

Mr. Bakugou jumps in now, having sat down beside his wife with a worried expression. "What about his work? Have you tried contacting them?"

At this, Shouta hesitates. Telling the truth here would mean revealing that Hisashi made it all up—the business trips, the job itself, his source of income. And if he told Mrs. Bakugou all of that? Well, it's safe to say she could probably come to some pretty daunting conclusions by herself.

Would it be right for Shouta to tell her everything? It's not like he brought it up himself. It's also not like he's talking about Izuku's vigilantism or the other powers the kid has explicitly told them not to mention.

He can talk a little bit here, surely. It's his job as a hero to help people, and Mrs. Bakugou can help her nephew more only when she's in the know. It would be downright stupid to keep her in the dark.

Shouta only hopes Izuku isn't eavesdropping at the moment.

"The business he has listed under his contact information, Mr. Bakugou, simply doesn't exist." He makes sure to look at both of them while he speaks, as he doesn't want them to mistake anything he's saying. "We tried reaching out to nearby places, too, however as of right now we've yet to receive any word. We had people do a sweep of the apartment he apparently rents somewhere in New York, but it turns out that nobody has been living there for years. It's abandoned."

There's a moment of silence where Mrs. Bakugou seems to process the new information. Her face isn't very expressive, much like her son's, but Shouta can tell she's having some kind of inner turmoil.

All at once he's reminded of Izuku's warnings from before they entered the house.

Mrs. Bakugou stands up, now looking at the many pictures on her wall. "I figured he was making that American shit up. He was always too obsessed with that place." She folds her arms. "I take it that's the real reason why UA is allowing you to look after Izuku, right? You're suspecting Hisashi is involved in some kind of criminal stuff? My bet's on money laundering and quirk drug trafficking."

Hizashi's brows fly up. "Quirk drug trafficking?"

Mrs. Bakugou nods. "Oh, yeah. Hisashi loved quirks. Would talk nonstop about how powerful some of them are and how useful they can be when used right. Crazy son of a bitch."

Shouta and Hizashi exchange looks. There's so much they need to talk about now, but it looks like they'll have to wait for another time.

“Aizawa?”

Hizashi swipes a hand over his hair to pat down the fly-aways. “In our experience, people who go through such great lengths to hide their true identity usually aren’t low-level thugs or criminals. They are, most times, full-fledged villains with years of experience. We can’t be sure of anything yet, but rest assured we’re approaching this with the utmost caution. It’s always better to be safe than sorry when it comes to people’s lives.”

Mr. Bakugou dips his head, and his glasses slide down his nose. “Of course. We’re only hoping to be able to keep Izuku as safe as possible. Plus, if Izuku is safe, our son is too. They can’t go without each other.”

“UA does not want to let him slip through the cracks,” Shouta explains. “We value each student and know their abilities. We want to make sure his goals can still be attainable despite his less than fortunate situation. This is why we are using every resource available to help.”

“Hello?”

“Well,” Mrs. Bakugou sniffs, “all things considered, I’m grateful Hisashi never hurt Izuku directly. If he is a villain, at least he never brought Izuku into it. That’s all I can say for him.”

At this, Shouta stays deathly silent.

Hizashi rests his hand briefly on Shouta’s leg under the table but moves it away just as quickly. He fixes his shirt and turns to the two Bakugous. “If I may, what was he like, exactly? You’ve met him before, I take it?”

“Oh, I’ve always hated him. That bitch was a fraud from the very start,” Mrs. Bakugou says without remorse.

“Mitsuki…”

“Oh, don’t act like you didn’t feel the same way! You know exactly what I’m talking about!”

Mr. Bakugou casts a worried look in the direction of the stairs. “Please, keep it down. The last thing we need is for him to know we’re discussing this. You know how he gets!”

The woman huffs but does lower her voice when she continues. “On the outside, Hisashi was just the picture-perfect man. He was handsome, tall, muscular, charming, and overall just a nice gentleman. He had the whitest hair I’d ever seen. It was all natural, too, which was a little rarer back

then. Modeling agencies loved that shit. Anyway, he and Inko met when someone was trying to steal her purse. He got it back for her, apparently, and that's how he managed to worm his way into her heart."

"Aizawa? You alive?"

Mr. Bakugou takes over. "They started dating pretty soon after, and they were a great couple, really. They were what everyone wanted to have. They complemented each other well. Even their quirks did."

At the mention of his quirk, Shouta leans in.

"They did little shows since Inko was able to use her quirk on his fire. It sort of became their trademark: his green fire breath with her green hair. I mean, it was all so perfect, and she seemed happier than she'd ever been." Mr. Bakugou looks at his wife with a dark gleam to his eye. "But we knew better. There was just something about him. He was a few years older than her, and, sure, he did everything right, at least as far as we could tell, but… he was so quiet about his personal life outside of Inko. It was like he didn't have anything to talk about besides her. And it was just sweet at first, of course, but after a while it just became weird. He didn't have anything else to him. At that time, he only mentioned his job a couple of times, and even then he was tight lipped."

Most definitely because he had an illegal occupation, Shouta guesses, but he stays quiet for now.

Mrs. Bakugou scoffs at the mere memory of what she's talking about. "He proposed for the first time a year after they met. She denied and said she needed more time, and so he waited without complaint. Three years later, he proposed again, and that was it."

"They were together for four years before getting married?" Hizashi clarifies.

Mr. Bakugou nods. "And if I'm being honest, I was never close with him. He was never a fan of us, because I guess we made it obvious we weren't enthralled with him. He was just obsessed with her, really. It was a little scary. And Inko… she never saw it. Mitsuki tried to show her all the red flags, but by then it was too late." He sighs, and it's a soft, pitiful sound. "They separated soon after she became pregnant. She never told us why, only said she couldn't be with him anymore with what kind of man he was, but we never saw him again."

"She loved Izuku more than anything else," Mrs. Bakugou says, looking somewhere into the distance. "But anyone could see how much she was

hurting. I tried to get her to talk, but she refused. She never spoke about him again to me, and it only scared her when I brought him up, so… eventually I stopped asking about him."

At the end of her sentence, Mrs. Bakugou stands up abruptly and walks into the kitchen, seemingly too angry to continue speaking quietly.

Mr. Bakugou pushes up his glasses and fiddles with his hands. "She disappeared when Izuku was almost six." His gaze drops to his knees. "Mitsuki believes he had something to do with it."

With the air suddenly turning somber, Shouta waits for a few seconds before asking his next question. Before he can get the words out, though, a door opens upstairs.

Masaru sweat drops and clasps his hands together loudly, signaling the end of the conversation for now.

And, really, Shouta doesn't think it could've ended at a worse time.

"Aizawa!"

Izuku's loud voice right by his ear jolts Shouta awake. The boy pulls away, yanking back the finger he was using to continuously jab at Shouta's cheek.

The man shakes his head and rubs his face, trying to remember where he is. Izuku peers at him curiously from where he's standing at the opposite end of the table. He looks suddenly awkward, like he isn't sure he's supposed to be there.

Shouta groans and reaches for his bottle of eye drops, wondering how he managed to fall asleep while working. Checking the clock in the kitchen, he notices it's only eight at night.

"Are you okay?" Izuku asks, voice surprisingly soft. His eyes are wide and shining with some emotion. Shouta thinks it's worry—he can feel it hanging in the air now.

He waves off the question. "I'm fine. Just needed a break."

"I called your name a bunch of times," Izuku states. "I thought you were dead."

"Not today."

Izuku studies him for a moment and then walks a little closer. Missy

claws up onto the boy's shoulder then and perches there to watch Shouta as well. "Are you working?"

"Trying to," he says. Izuku leans over to get a look at the case files Shouta has open on the table, and he reaches to pull one closer to him. Shouta quickly pushes the hand away, though. "Those aren't for your eyes."

"Who says?"

"The law."

Izuku's expression sours. His hair is damp, telling Shouta he just washed it. The faint aroma of pine and honey wafts through the air, a sure indicator that he used Shouta's curly shampoo—because of course he used it.

Shouta is too tired to even sigh. He just picks his discarded pen back up and tries to find where he last stopped his annotations.

He has a long night ahead of him.

"Where's Yama?" Izuku asks. He's scratching Missy's chin now, facing away from Shouta.

"He's doing another late night interview. He won't be back until early morning."

Izuku hums in understanding. He glances back every now and then to stare at Shouta, who pointedly ignores the display. If Izuku has something to say, he hopes he'll say it without prompting.

Thankfully, after another minute or two, he does.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Izuku tips his head. "You seem stressed."

"I'm just glad the weekend is here, kid. Can you feed the cats for me?"

"Already done. I did it while you were playing dead."

Shouta angles a brow in his direction. "So why isn't Missy eating right now?"

"She likes to eat after the other three do." He plants a kiss on the tuxedo's head. "Makes her feel like a princess."

Shouta would like to ask how he knows that, and if Missy herself told

him, but he decides not to. He crosses out a portion of the document before him and turns to the back, blowing out an exasperated breath.

He's trying hard to concentrate, but he just can't. The memory of his discussion with Mrs. Bakugou keeps playing in the forefront of his mind, and the secrets he's keeping from Izuku now are weighing down on him heavily. What's wrong with him? Why is this affecting him so badly?

He's supposed to be good at this. He's not supposed to care about secrets. Ugh, now his head hurts. He's in need of some Tylenol.

Shouta drops his head onto the table once more, trying and failing to stay fully awake. He needs to get these readings done before morning time, and he also needs to scan and email some of his findings to one of his coworkers at his partnered agency. Plus, Nezu is having him pick up more lessons for the second and third years at UA, so what little free time he had before during the day is now being sucked up.

There's not nearly enough hours in the week for all the work he's been given.

When he peels his face off the table, he sees that Izuku is now sitting at a chair and running a finger along all the cracks in the wood. As Shouta watches, Izuku flicks a piece of cat hair off.

He's clearly thinking about something, too. Izuku only ever acts this awkward when he's in the middle of working something out.

Making up his mind *very* quickly, Shouta scratches at his nose. "Are you rested?"

The question makes Izuku's eyes narrow. "Uh, yeah, I guess? I had that nap you made me take."

"Good." Shouta shoos him away. "So, get ready."

"Get ready?" Izuku repeats, his voice high-pitched.

"Your suit, kid. Go put it on."

Shouta can see the exact moment the realization dawns on him, as the boy's face lights up like a damn Christmas tree—quite literally, as his quirk comes to life in the form of crimson lightning. He sits up straighter in his chair, and Missy jumps off of him to run somewhere in the corner of the room. "My—my suit? You mean, like, *Rabbit?"*

Shouta waves a hand in a *what else* gesture. “It’s Friday. What did I say you could do tonight?” When Izuku only stares in disbelief, his eyes sparkling and his chest beginning to heave, the man sighs loudly and kicks his knee beneath the table. “You going or what? You’re wasting the night away.”

Giddy, Izuku springs up from his seat, nearly knocking the chair to the floor in the process, and stumbles to the hallway. He disappears in a flash, and Shouta feels something warm make its way up inside his chest.

He can’t decide if it’s funny or sad that this is probably the only thing that will perk Izuku right up no matter what mood he’s in.

Shouta hasn’t even made it to the next page of his file before Izuku is barreling back through the mouth of the hallway, hopping on one leg so he can pull his reinforced boots on. He has his Rabbit mask held between his teeth and his newest collapsible staff hanging from his back.

He swipes one of the house keys from the holder by the door and finishes zipping up his suit and utilities. It seems he’s made quite a few new additions to his setup.

Shouta isn’t surprised.

Izuku puts on a big hoodie at the last minute so that no cameras will catch him leaving this area. When he’s done with that, he rushes back over to Shouta, who’s still sitting down, and pushes on his shoulder. “C’mon, c’mon! Why are you still sitting there? You know the best criminals are out at this time. We can’t miss them!”

Shouta lets him continue shaking him. “Be back by midnight. And take a water bottle with you.”

Hearing this, Izuku pauses, hands still on Shouta’s shoulder. “Wait. You’re not coming with me?”

The man flashes him a look. “Do I need to?”

Izuku’s mouth opens, closes, then opens again like a fish out of water. He pulls away, shaking his head fervently. “Uh, no! No, not really. I just thought… I thought you’d…” He cuts himself off and makes his way to the door, apparently more excited than he is confused. “Can I be back around 1-ish instead?”

Shouta forces back the smirk that tugs at his lips. Of course the kid would try to negotiate like this. “11:30-ish, looking at 11:00-ish.”

Izuku slaps his palms together and dips his head. “Midnight it is! Bye!” He runs out the door, but before it can close he looks back and grins at Shouta, his teeth shining bright. “Thank you, Sensei!”

With that, his student is gone, leaving behind nothing but his disgruntled tuxedo cat. It takes all of Shouta’s willpower to not go rushing after him, to not get his capture weapon and follow along to at least make sure nothing terrible will happen. Izuku isn’t helpless, as they’ve been made aware of multiple times before. Shouta doesn’t know how he’s forgotten that recently. He thinks that taking care of Izuku for the past few weeks has messed something up in his brain. It’s made him forget just how not weak he is. The video coming to light about Stain was what really forced Shouta into that reality check. Besides, Inui told him that he needs to show as much trust as possible. The quickest way to build back up their relationship from before Hosu —whatever kind of relationship it was; Shouta doesn’t know—is to do things like this.

Shouta needs to show more than he needs to tell. He needs to make Izuku realize he trusts him enough to be able to go back out by himself again.

Is Hizashi going to be happy about this? Especially with the threat of Hawks and the Hero’s Commission looming over their heads? Absolutely not. Can he deal, though? Yes.

He’ll have to understand. Plus, he was the one who was preaching about taking things slow in learning how to accommodate Izuku in the first place, so really how is this Shouta’s fault?

Shouta lets his head rest against the cool table once more. It feels good against his warm cheek.

There’s no chance of him being able to finish his work now. Not since he just sent Izuku out to go fight crime! Again, he knows Izuku is capable, but still. What if something happens? With all the Nomu allegedly running about and the new bout of villains springing up, who’s to say Izuku won’t get caught up in something?

The only reassurance that Shouta has is that Izuku seems more willing to hit that panic button now to contact them if things go awry. They have his location and vitals, so as long as Shouta keeps watch on that, everything should be just fine, right?

As he lets his eyes drift shut, Shouta can't help but think back to the last conversation he had with Mrs. Bakugou.

Hizashi walks out to the car with Mr. Bakugou by his side, both of them laughing and talking. Bakugou is following Izuku, who is whispering something probably embarrassing in his friend's ear.

Shouta is about to follow behind when Mrs. Bakugou calls his name from the doorway. He turns around, hands stuffed in his pockets. The blond woman looks so much more serious than before. There's a calm look on her face that wasn't there previously, and her eyes are sharp and clear.

It's a face that only a parent could have.

"He looks up to you," she says quietly, taking one of the steps down to stand beside him. She answers his silent question with a soft, sad smile. "If I'm honest, I had my doubts about him staying with you UA teachers, but it's obvious he's comfortable around y'all."

Shouta doesn't know what to say to that, so he doesn't say anything at all. He just lifts his head a little in acknowledgement, wondering where this is going. He can still hear his husband and student jeering down the driveway.

It's a good thing the driveway is long.

"You know, he loved his mother a shitton." Mrs. Bakugou's fingers tap on her forearm absentmindedly. "He still does, of course, but in the years since she left, that spark in him just… kinda died. He stopped being his usual energetic and happy self. He didn't have that gleeful look on his face that he always used to have—that face that just told you he felt safe and secure. But nowadays? I see it on him again. More and more often." She sighs a little, and when she extends her hand to shake Shouta's, the man takes it without hesitation. "So, I just wanted to thank ya. It's clear he trusts you a lot, so UA must be doing something right for him. I'm glad my kids have you as their teacher."

A lump settles in Shouta's throat. He isn't sure how to process that, or if there even is anything to say in response. He can't promise her anything, and she must know that, so there really isn't much Shouta can say. So, he clears his throat and turns to face her fully. The wind whips at his face and causes his long hair to fly everywhere. Pulling out his wallet, he takes a slip of paper out from the very back and hands it to her. It's old and wrinkled, with more than a few coffee stains on it, but it's readable all the same.

"This is the number to a good friend of mine," he says, holding her crimson

gaze to show how serious he is. “He’s a detective. I can’t tell you a lot, but you should know that he’s the same one who—”

“He handled Inko’s disappearance,” she says, eyes widening when she reads the name. Shouta figures he shouldn’t be so surprised. “I remember him. He’s working on this case right now? To find his father?” At Shouta’s nod, she seems to deflate. Pressing a hand to her forehead, she speaks with a watery tone. “God, that’s a relief. I’m… I'm glad. He was always very nice. Much better than those other useless assholes. He never once gave up on us.”

Shouta wants to say that he knows, that he was told everything that Naomasa went through with that frustrating case of the mother who abandoned her six-year-old in their apartment, but it’s not his place to say, so he refrains. He wouldn’t want to upset her anymore anyway. “I’ve written my personal cell on the back. Since it’s possible he’s going to be in our care for a while yet, you should have it just in case.”

“Thank you, really. Oh, and one more thing.” Her eyes flit away for a split second, moving to where Izuku is currently speaking with Mr. Bakugou. “Please don’t tell Izuku that I know he’s been lying to me. He’s always been so headstrong. I know he’s covering things up for what he probably thinks is a good reason. It might screw him up if he thinks I already know about his shitty dad.”

Shouta agrees not to, a sinking feeling in his gut now. He bows to her and makes his way to where everyone is waiting for him.

During the drive home, he wonders just how many people Midoriya Hisashi has really hurt in his life.

Chapter End Notes

i found a new job!!! i told myself I wouldn’t go back to restaurants but here I am 😩 i am sorry in advance for the upcoming sporadic updates! love y’all 💕 and stay 🐷

mightve alrdy rec’d this one but im in a sad mood again so have this one when she loved me - sarah mclachlan (yt)

i

first and last

Chapter Notes

april i have missed you. also thank y'all sm for over 800k hits :)

cw: pulling hair out

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is sort of an unofficial expert on pain.

He's experienced in all of its types and subdivisions. He's been on the receiving end and the giving end, so it's safe to say he knows what he's talking about. For example, he's smashed his head into walls so many times now that he's fully convinced he just lives in a state of perpetual hallucination. Half the time he isn't sure if the killer emo clown at the edge of his vision is real or not, but he's not about to ask anyone around him for obvious reasons.

That, combined with the fact that he now spends a large majority of his time dreaming and talking with dead people, doesn't make for a very good basis on what's reality and what's fiction—but never mind that.

Izuku is crouched on the edge of a medium-sized building, bōstaff clutched tightly in hand. He's on the opposite side of the city, having decided to start at the end of his patrol route instead since he knows the crime rate here has been steadily increasing due to public unrest.

He should be ecstatic right now. He should be eager and giddy to get going and fight again. But for some reason, Izuku is hesitant. He isn't scared, no, of course not. It's just that he… he isn't sure he should be doing this.

Aizawa gave him permission, yeah, but he seemed distracted. He could barely look Izuku in the eye. Did he really mean it? Did he really think Izuku should go out alone, or did he say that just to get him out of his hair and make Hound Dog happy?

Izuku knows it's unfair to assume something like that, but it's not without reason.

His stomach flips around wildly inside him, making Izuku hunch over even more. He has to force himself to take a step back from the ledge

so he doesn't topple right off. He's so nervous he feels like he's about to puke!

He should call Aizawa. Maybe he can ask him if he's sure this is alright. He can—

No! The only thing that would do is make Izuku seem even more childish. He needs to keep this privilege. He doesn't want Aizawa to think he can't handle this, because he can handle it. Perfectly, actually!

The only reason he's feeling like this is because he hasn't been out by himself in a while, that's all. Yeah, exactly that.

Izuku jumps onto the neighboring rooftop and takes off along the streets, keeping his eyes and ears out for anything suspicious. He tries his hardest to focus, but his thoughts keep going back to Aizawa and Yamada.

The voice hero is working late again, and so is Aizawa. Is it really appropriate for Izuku to be out alone when they're so busy? It's not like Izuku thinks he's going to need them as backup anytime soon, of course! But still, wouldn't they want that as an option?

"Why am I being so stupid?" Izuku grits out, pressing his palms against his forehead in irritation. "I've never acted like this before. What's changed?"

Darkness moves around before him, and Izuku's head snaps to the side just in time to see Sixth stepping closer to him from around a wall. His ghostly form is so faint that it could almost be mistaken for a trick of the light. *What hasn't changed, you mean,* the man says, voice silky smooth.

Izuku sighs and turns away, going back to his scouting. "I'm still me. I'm still *Rabbit.* Nothing has changed that would make me act like—like *this."*

Maybe you don't actually want to be out here, En offers, floating to a stop beside him. The air grows chillier with his presence. *There's no shame in cutting this off early.*

Izuku throws him a bewildered look. "Are you kidding?" Not waiting for a response, Izuku steps off the side of the roof and plummets to the floor. He takes off in the direction of commotion and reels back in a huff when he notices Sixth keeping pace. "What made you come out of

hiding?"

You wouldn't stop thinking. You're very loud.

"You can shut me out if you try harder."

And you can get to the scene of the crime faster if you'd pay more attention.

Not deigning with a response, Izuku shoots toward the sudden screams that erupt from a neighboring street, already mentally plotting out the situation by using Extract to pinpoint the location of every individual involved.

There are five people in total—two of which (both with emitter quirks, if Izuku is feeling this correctly) seem to be backed up against a wall. The other three (one transformative and two mutant) are crowding around them.

Izuku can hear their conversation as clear as day even before rounding the corner.

"This is ridiculous!" A man with a tinny voice exclaims. "Are you guys even heroes?"

"We don't hafta be pros to tell when trouble's brewing," another snides, and Izuku feels a spike in the energy in the air.

When he lands on the roof adjacent to the little alcove the group has found themselves in, he finds he was right. The first thing Izuku notices is that there are two men with long, spindly white hair that almost directly resembles the stingers on a jellyfish. The likelihood of the relation between them being siblings is high. Izuku thinks the percentage would be above 95.

The tendrils glow in the darkness around them and are almost translucent. Izuku scoots forward as far as he can on the edge of the roof, trying to get a better look.

Jellyfish Twins' buddy, whom Izuku will call Yasu, starts to convulse for a second in his spot before a pair of bone spikes suddenly jut out from his forearms. They grow longer in size by the second, and Izuku shivers a little as even more grow from the man's elbows and shoulders.

Now *that* is one hell of a transformation quirk.

The fifth person, who has her arm around the first man as if to protect him from the attackers, has faint green electricity crackling around her ears.

With all of these pieces together, Izuku knows what's going on.

"We're not criminals!" the woman retorts. "You've no right to hold us here like this, dumbass! Go find one of those damn creatures to fight, I don't care! Just leave us be!"

Yasu pushes his way forward to meet the two head on. "It's dangerous out here at night. Why're you idiots out here if you're not gonna do something illegal?"

Both the woman and man's mouths drop open, absolutely stunned by this question, and Izuku decides he's seen enough. As funny as it is, he can't wait any longer to listen to what these people have to say.

Izuku drops from his five story rooftop vantage point, landing easily on steady feet right beside Yasu.

Immediately, an arm comes flying up to puncture Izuku, but the boy breaks off the curved tips of the bone spikes with one easy swipe of his hand, not even blinking. He grabs the man's wrist then and holds it there with a deathly tight grip.

"Now," he begins, tone light, "I know I can't be talking, but you three have really got to get a license if you want to play at being heroes like this."

"Wha—" Yasu falls forward when Izuku's hand cracks down at the point where the neck meets the shoulder. He crumples in on himself, unconscious, and Izuku catches him before he can hit the ground.

The Jellyfish Duo are quick to react, Izuku will give them that. Their tendrils flash a variety of colors before extending to try and wrap around Izuku, but they're not fast enough. Izuku throws Yasu at them to limit their attacks, as he isn't sure if contacting the tendrils will poison him or not. They surely won't put their friend in danger, so they're not going to use the tentacles now. This gives Izuku one full second to come up with a counter—and he only needs a fourth of it.

By the end of that second, the three wannabe law enforcers (not including Izuku, of course) are unconscious. The boy crouches down and begins to carefully line them up against the dirty wall, mindful of their quirks. The bone spikes slowly recede into Yasu's skin, and Izuku

watches with quiet, mild interest.

He takes out his phone after a moment of consideration and snaps a quick photo of the recession in action. The way the bones slide back underneath the skin is just incredible to Izuku. He wonders if he can replicate it with a future support item.

“Who is that?” The woman whisper-hisses to her partner, who is currently shuffling backwards to get as far away from Izuku and the criminals as possible, if the sound of his shoes sliding against the asphalt has anything to say about it.

“I don’t know,” the man grits back, tone worried. Izuku moves his head and watches them take even more frantic steps away. “Sounds too young to be a hero, though. Let’s get outta here.”

Izuku stands at the same time as a truck passes by in the road, illuminating him briefly with yellow light. “Are you two okay?” He calls.

The man freezes, hand stuck on the woman’s shoulder. They look suddenly so much more afraid than before. The terror is thick in the air, almost overwhelming. “Wait a minute, aren’t you—?”

Green Lightning is the first to go. She grabs the man and drags him behind her on the way out of the alcove. She must also have some sort of speed predisposition, as they’re both gone in a matter of seconds.

Izuku is left confused and a little upset, though he knows he shouldn’t be. He can’t let these sorts of things get to him.

It’s definitely not the first time that the people he’s saved have run from him, and it surely won’t be the last. Except the only difference is that while those other times most definitely weren’t personal, he has a feeling that this time around it is.

After alerting the cops to the troublemakers and waiting until he sees the flashing lights pull around the corner before leaving, Izuku continues his thorough combing of the streets. This area of the city is particularly rowdy tonight, but he’s not stopping robbery or breaking up fights or dismantling drug deals like he normally would be—none of that. By the time he’s only half an hour into his patrolling, Izuku has stopped four separate groups of restless civilians with various support items from wrongfully attacking other innocent people.

On his fifth run, Izuku is more concerned than annoyed.

“Don’t you know how dangerous this is?” Izuku asks nonjudgmentally, crouching in front of a burly man with bison-like features. It’s a good thing he upgraded his capture wire using Nezu’s supplies a month ago, or else it wouldn’t currently be holding this behemoth of a mutant.

“‘Course I do,” is the out of breath reply Izuku receives. “Why do ya think I’m doing it?”

Izuku tips his head, still holding onto one end of the capture wire so he can tighten or loosen his hold on the man if needed. “You looking for the adrenaline from it all, or are you trying to protect someone?”

A snort. “Why do you care?”

Izuku jabs a thumb behind himself, pointing to where the young man the bison mutant was in the middle of attacking is limping away with the help of his friend. “Because you’re hurting the wrong people here.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” he says, though his voice wavers a little. He glares off to the side, eye twitching. “He shouldn’t’ve been slinking around in the dark at this time of night. Do you know how many people are scared to go outside now because of the likes of him? It’s hard to tell the difference between a villain in hiding and a regular man—and we ain’t got the luxury of playing guessing games when there are lives on the line here.”

“He was in the shadows to avoid *you,”* Izuku counters. He leans closer to the mutant, and his gaze moves to the small white horn on the right side of his head. “Listen, I get it. Trust me. Everyone is scared, and you *should* be. If you’re not scared after everything that’s happened, you’re probably stupid. But you just can’t jump someone on the basis that they *look* like they might be a villain. That’s how innocent people die.”

This is the wrong thing to say, evidently, as White Horn tries to lunge at Izuku—not that he gets very far in his restraints. “I don’t need you to patronize me, boy! I know who you are!”

Izuku doesn’t move even though White Horn’s face is merely half a foot away from his own. The mutant blows out a hot breath through his nose, and it rustles Izuku’s bangs.

Beneath the indignance, hesitation, and annoyance rising in the air around White Horn, Izuku senses… foreboding. Uneasiness weighs heavy at the back of his mind, and Izuku wonders just how long he’s

been feeling like this for.

“Do you have a family?” He asks, and for a moment it looks like White Horn is about to have another angry fit at the intrusive and admittedly suspicious question, but after a bit of silence he just sighs and turns his gaze to the ground.

“I have a daughter,” he admits, his voice a low rumble. “She just started school this year.”

“You’re scared you’ll lose her?”

Izuku doesn’t get a verbal response to that, but the answer is pretty clear, all things considered. He stands up and helps the young man and his friend get into the car that’s parked further down the street, and he directs them to the nearest hospital even though he’s sure the man’s leg isn’t actually broken. He intervened in time before White Horn could do any real damage, and it seems that the civilians don’t even want to press charges or get the police involved for whatever reason.

And really, Izuku isn’t in a position to judge them for their decision.

When he returns to White Horn, the anger has fully dissipated, and all that remains is exhaustion and dread.

Izuku takes hold of the capture wire and loosens it enough for him to get free, not even bothering with having One for All or Boost at the ready. He’s certain White Horn isn’t going to start another fight.

“The heroes are trying their best to step up and protect everyone they can with this new Nomu situation springing up,” Izuku says, trying his hardest not to sound condescending or rude, because that’s actually the farthest thing from what he’s truly feeling. “Let them carry the load out here, and you work on protecting your daughter where you can actually help. If you keep doing this, someone will end up killing you, and then who’s going to keep her safe?” He ignores White Horn’s shocked expression while he gathers up his capture wire and turns away, already looking around for his next route. “Try not to hurt another innocent person like this, or else I really will bring you in, yeah?”

Izuku jumps up and onto a roof ledge, letting his eyes and Extract both scan the perimeter.

“Hey, what about you!” The man calls, making Izuku pause.

The vigilante looks over his shoulder, a question in his expression.

White Horn looks disappointed all of a sudden, as if he's pitying something. "Do you do it for the kicks, or do you have someone to protect too?"

Izuku stares, committing the mutant's face and voice to mind. He notes every small cut and nick on his fur, revealing patchy skin, and then looks away once more. *I have a mother,* he wants to say, but the words don't sound quite right.

He has a brother, as much as he surely doesn't want his protection, and he has more friends now than he knows what to do with. He has his cat, too. He has many things to protect, which is funny considering that one of his rules when he first started his vigilantism was to not get attached or let others get close.

Because Izuku knew then that the only fate that awaited those who veered too close to him was death.

But there is no easy way to voice any of these things, not that he would choose to even if there was, so Izuku only lifts up a halfhearted shoulder and says, "A bit of both."

And maybe that's the most truthful thing he's said all week.

Someone hugs him right after the end of a firefight.

It's the first hug he's had in a long time, barring the half ones he gets from Kacchan or Kayama once in a blue moon, but it's even more daunting to Izuku since it's coming from a civilian.

Izuku isn't stupid; he knows he has supporters. He knows he has followers and people who are still dead set on defending him against all the accusations being flung around nowadays, but the situation still took him by surprise. No one has ever tried to hug him on patrol. Not even the little kids he's saved before have tried!

Whether it's because of his reputation or secret identity or power, Izuku doesn't know, and that's not really important to him. He doesn't

need people to hug him. He doesn't want that praise precisely because he doesn't actually do what he does to *be* praised. It makes him uncomfortable, truly.

And not to mention that someone getting that close to him is also extremely dangerous.

Which is why Izuku is stiff as a board, fingers already wrapped around the knife hanging on the inside of his jacket. One for All is alive and alert, but there aren't any negative or otherwise suspicious emotions coming from the civilian, so Izuku doesn't punch them away or retaliate.

He stands there, barely breathing, with red sparks lighting up the environment. The woman's arms are tight around him, but not enough to be restraining or painful. The hug was sudden, and her movements leading up to it didn't point towards this action at all, telling Izuku this was a split-second decision on her end.

"I'm so sorry," she says hoarsely, pulling away from him after a moment more. She's taller than him by an entire foot, so she has to look down to meet his gaze. Her skin is tinged orange, and little dark stripes run up her arms and neck to resemble a tiger's fur. "I just can't thank you enough for that. These streets have been getting worse than ever! It's so hard to even do normal things now."

Izuku shakes himself from his stupor and clears his throat, his body still buzzing from the leftover contact. He picks up her discarded grocery bags and offers them to her. "You guys need more heroes to patrol this area. Do you want me to walk you home?"

"Oh, no, I think I can take it from here now, thank you!" She gives him a nervous smile. "And most of our local heroes quit after what happened to Native, you know. Said they were too scared to keep going, and while I want to be angry at them, I can't bring myself to be. I can't imagine what I'd do in their shoes."

Izuku, swallowing back down the bitter taste in his mouth, nods in understanding and agreement and tells her goodbye.

It's unfortunate, but this is happening in a lot of other places. While many of the heroes are fighting even harder and taking up more hours to keep civilians safe, others are dropping like flies and going into hiding.

No one wants to end up like Headless Native.

While Izuku wasn't a big fan of the surprise hug, he thinks he would definitely take that over the wine bottle someone throws at him an hour after that event.

Now, unlike being hugged, Izuku is actually somewhat used to things being thrown at him with malice. It happened a lot when he was younger and it *still* happens.

So really it's not hard at all to feel the wind shift behind him and snap his neck to the side to avoid getting hit. His arm shoots out, Pull at his fingertips, and calls the wine bottle right back. The neck of it settles nicely in his hand, and he's disappointed to find that it's empty.

He thinks it's more exciting when it's not. Either way, he sets it on the ground before him.

"You're a fake!" A man with ridged skin shouts, hands curled into fists. He reaches behind himself to grab another projectile. "Criminal! You're a fucking criminal, just like the rest of them! Multi-quirked *freak!"*

Izuku's heart skips a beat in its cycle. He stands in the middle of the road, still hovering over the unconscious woman he took down who was threatening to kill everyone in a five mile radius with her quirk. The boy doesn't look at the civilian, too busy trying to calm his nerves.

Another person joins in from the sidelines, seemingly more ballsy now that someone else has started. "I heard the Nomu have multiple powers," she says, voice shaking, "so what does that make you? Where have you been, Rabbit? Hiding from the truth?"

"You've never been on our side!" The man from before exclaims, but despite his anger, he doesn't move closer to Izuku. "Was everything you did for us before fake? Did you like making us believe in you, knowing we never knew who you really were? Was it *funny?"*

Izuku crouches down and wraps his capture tape around the unconscious woman, biting his tongue. Light smoke roses from the ground, and he sees En from the corner of his vision materializing.

This must be fun to watch when you're not the one being targeted, Izuku thinks almost bitterly.

But then the wind whistles and Izuku grabs another glass bottle out of the air right before it hits his temple. He finally turns to look at the

civilians, and they immediately shrink back, mouths snapping shut.

Izuku stands. “It’s not funny,” he says quietly.

They don’t respond, too freaked out to say or do much of anything. Izuku’s gaze shifts past them as more quirk signatures join the mix. Someone saunters into the light of the streetlamp, holding something big behind him that Izuku can’t make out yet. And then another person with webbed fingers quickly glides in, waving his hands around while facing the others.

“Stop it!” The webbed man pleads. “He’s just a kid! Don’t you pay any attention?”

“Why should I?” The guy with ridged skin chuffs. “Just looking at him here confirms all our suspicions! Don’t act like it doesn’t! He’s a fucking murderer!”

Izuku swallows. The mist grows denser around him.

“But he just saved you, idiot!” Webs reminds, starting up another argument.

The newcomer emerges even more from the shadows, ignoring the others. “Rodents just don’t know when to quit,” he drawls, sounding almost excited. It has the hairs on Izuku’s neck rising.

Yeah, this guy is a problem. He needs to figure out right now what’s the best way to—

Light glints off steel, and Izuku’s nerves light on fire. A freight train blares in his ears, and then it’s time to move, because the man is now yanking back his sleeve and letting his arm transform into what looks like a rocket launcher.

There’s no time for Izuku to do much of anything before the weapon goes off with an earth-shaking explosion, but once it’s launched, it feels like Izuku has all the time in the world to stress about it.

It’s headed right towards him. Izuku is eye to eye with it, and he can feel the heat in the air around him expanding as it gets closer. It’s a decent sized one—two feet in length and half of one in diameter. It could be bigger, sure, but Izuku knows from experience that rocket sizes don’t always equate to firepower.

And with how this one was launched so quickly, Izuku has a feeling

it's going to pack one hell of a punch.

Which presents a list of problems. One, Izuku can't just dodge out of the way. There's an apartment building behind him filled with hundreds of people—and many, many, babies, if the quirkless energies he can sense in there tells him anything. Two, he can't redirect it upwards either. If he redirects it upwards, it may just explode before it clears the top of the buildings, so it would take out the middle levels and cause an entire collapse—a fucking catastrophe, and not just for those inside the building. Everyone else around would get hurt too. Three, redirecting it to the ground may be the best choice out of all three, but it's still highly dangerous, as this part of the city has its water treatment plants and sewer systems underground.

Right where they are right now, actually.

If Izuku forces the blast into the ground, the chance of a disastrous flood and a week without clean water for the people living here occurring is high. Way too high for Izuku's liking.

Now, he can definitely catch it, but he'll likely be blown apart if he doesn't do it right. His guts will be splayed everywhere by the time the explosion has subsided. And even if he did that and tried to minimize the blast, the surrounding areas would still get some damage.

But Izuku doesn't have any better plans, and nor does he have any of his support weapons that could help with this situation, so he has no other choice.

He only has one feasible idea, and it'll have to work.

The earth resumes its normal ticking, and Izuku moves along with the flow of time. His next moves are practiced, as if he's had a lot of experience in this type of thing.

By the time he's in the air, quirks at the ready, the rocket is right beneath him. Izuku twists, red lightning zipping around his form, and kicks the back of it downwards. This way the worst of the blast can come from the top and shoot straight up, where Izuku can take most of the damage, and the rest will be directed out of the sides and towards the floor. This isn't usually how rockets work, at least not the ones Izuku used to make at the Club, but just by looking at this one he thinks that this time is different.

And hopefully he's right.

The back of the rocket smashes into the asphalt just as Izuku rights himself midair and crosses his arms in that familiar *x* pattern. Deflect appears in time to protect Izuku's body from being mangled, but this doesn't make the boy feel better in the slightest, because his earlier perceptions were correct—the firepower of this small rocket is *off the fucking charts.*

Izuku's eyes have to close from the sheer power of the blast, and he's blown upwards, scorching fire running along his limbs and towards the rest of his body. The breath is knocked out of him when his back hits something solid, and bloody bile ejects from his mouth and coats the inside of his mask. The entire area seems to quake and vibrate, and Izuku can clearly hear cracks in the concrete below, along with the sounds of the civilians from before screaming.

Dammit. It wasn't enough. The blast must've reached the buildings on either side! Did it make it all the way through the ground as well? How deep did it reach? The power must be out. Iuzku wonders if the running water will hold up. Jesus, he needs to get to those buildings now and help evacuate and rescue those people. He needs to call for—

Izuku lands in a fiery heap in the crater the bomb created. He coughs and quickly takes off his mask, spitting out the rest of the blood and mucus. Ash and smoke fly into his mouth when he heaves in breaths, so after wiping off the fluids on the inside of the mask he quickly puts it back on. He pats down the certain parts of his suit that aren't fire resistant, feeling a short lived twinge of bitterness once he sees that a lot of his costume is torn from the shrapnel caused by the blast. He's bleeding in multiple places, and a jagged cut splits open part of his mask near his ear. It destroyed his air purifier and almost his voice changer!

Wooden splinters jut out from Izuku's thighs, but he's too busy to be confused.

He forces himself to stand and stumble out of the crater, wondering why it's suddenly so dark save for the patches of flames dispersed around him. The street lamps must've been taken out by the explosion.

It's hard to get a grasp on his surroundings, as he can barely walk straight. Being so close to the blast fucked up his senses. Izuku is just grateful he hasn't completely destroyed his hearing yet. After so many run-ins with bombs, he thought he would've lost it by now.

When Izuku takes another step forward where he vaguely feels someone's quirk signature, his face smashes into another wall, which is weird. He doesn't remember being *this* close to a building. He was walking straight down the road, right? Why is there a wall in the middle of the street? And why was there a wall in the sky as—

Wood. It's a wooden wall. A really thick one, too.

Izuku's clarity returns to him along with his senses, and his mouth drops open. He spins around, taking note of the reinforced wooden walls that circle around him and extend way up into the air like a dome. Parts of the wood are blackened and smoking, and other parts are simply on fire. Layers and layers of it are revealed in areas where the rocket's blast was the most powerful, but from where Izuku is standing, there doesn't seem to be any holes going into the outside.

Which can only mean one thing.

The wood groans and creaks, and Izuku finally recognizes the newest quirk signature pinging in his mind as the dome begins to retract. Some of the wood breaks off and clatters to the ground, but most of it returns to where it came from.

Kamui Woods is on one knee some twenty feet away, his chest heaving and shoulders shaking as his quirk rescinds. Dark crimson spurts from his shoulders and forearms, seeping from the cracks in his outstretched wooden appendages.

A shocked silence hits the clearing, and Izuku looks away from him to inspect the buildings around them. The relief that shoots through him when he notices that there's no damage to any of the residences is almost enough to have him drop to the ground once more.

He can scarcely believe it. The number ten pro hero was able to arrive on scene just in time to create a large, extra fortified dome around the bomb and Izuku, limiting the reach of the blast. How did he manage to do that? Izuku doesn't remember him having that much wood to use so freely in his arsenal before, even despite being ranked number ten.

Hell, if he had this kind of skill the last time he interacted with Izuku, Rabbit probably wouldn't have stood a chance then.

It's clear Woods has gotten much more powerful.

There's movement at the corner of his vision, and Izuku's palms tingle.

The man who shot the rocket is on the ground, eyes as wide as saucers and lip trembling.

The other civilian turns on him, and with his webbed hand he grabs the man by the collar and shouts in his face. “That’s a pro hero, you bastard! And are you insane? You could’ve killed everyone on this block!”

The original two people who were spewing insults at Izuku and throwing bottles at him are dead silent and quietly sitting up against the building. Their gazes are blank and horrified, and their regret tastes like acid in the air.

Rocket Launcher Man shifts, as if to move, and Izuku takes a step forward to deter him, but Woods is faster. His right arm extends and binds around the other man tightly, keeping his limbs pinned to his sides so he can’t use his quirk again.

Izuku moves back, feeling suddenly so out of place. He inches away, his heart palpitating. There are so many scents hitting his nose now. It's too much—the smell of his own blood, the acrid tang of ash, the weight of something distinctly familiar swirling around him, and then the heady press of the civilians’ fear. Izuku senses more people waking up and beginning to make their way to their front doors and windows due to the commotion.

Woods sits for just a moment longer, as if trying to heal the worst of the damage to his left arm, which is still bleeding profusely. And then his head turns slowly, like an owl, and his dark eyes land on Izuku.

Izuku's blood runs cold, and he prepares himself for the worst, muscles tensing. They stare at one another, neither of them speaking, and it’s like a stand-off.

The fear that hits Izuku this time isn’t like one he’s ever experienced before. It isn’t like *I'm about to die* panic, or *what are you going to do to me* anxiety. Rather, it’s more like *if you try to capture me for real right now, I’m not confident we would both come out unscathed.*

It’s an electricity bolt to Izuku’s chest. It feels like that split second after you miss a stair. You know you’re fucked, and you know you have very limited time and ways to unfuck the situation, so you’re both panicking and accepting of it.

Izuku should run. He should be getting as far away from here and Kamui Woods as possible.

But his body won't move. He's rooted to the spot, still unsure what he's supposed to do now. He was dealing with the disturbance and criminal activity first, and then Woods came in for a last minute save.

Izuku's not used to having to stop in the middle of his work because of that. Does he still stay and look over the other civilians? Does he investigate the minimal property damage?

But the number ten pro hero doesn't chase him or even speak to him. He only jerks his head to the side, a universal command: leave.

Izuku's brows fly up to his hairline. At first, he assumes it's a test, but after another moment of debating he realizes that Woods is being a hundred percent serious.

He's going to let him go.

Izuku, now confident that the situation is in good hands, doesn't need to be told twice. He frantically wipes the debris off of his costume and bows deeply in thanks. Woods gives one small nod in acknowledgement, but otherwise he doesn't react. He could be trying to save his energy to heal faster, or he could be trying to limit his interactions with Rabbit entirely.

Either way, this isn't Izuku's concern anymore. This is way out of his jurisdiction now that a top ten pro has come along. Izuku can safely retreat to the shadows and lick his wounds.

But as Izuku runs across uneven rooftops, his muscles burning in protest, that dreadful feeling follows him. There's a prickling sensation just beneath his skin. It's like an itch, but somehow it's more primal than that. The pins and needles won't go away. It's all consuming, and it pisses Izuku off so badly that he has to take a second to lean against a rooftop access door to catch his breath.

His limbs are heavy yet somehow lighter than air. He feels like a helium balloon chained to the floor.

Izuku yanks back his sleeves, letting his nails scratch against the bruised skin. It's not good enough, though. It doesn't do anything but make the itching worse. He pushes his mask to the side and drags his teeth along his palm and forearm, and while that subsides the feeling, Izuku knows it isn't a permanent solution.

He shakes himself free from these thoughts, irritated by his own

stupidity, and continues on with vigor. He passes by a window in an adjacent building and ignores the wings spreading out behind him in the reflection.

The air turns chilly again, making Izuku shiver. Storm clouds light up in the distance, a stark contrast to the cold blanket settling over his body.

“You still there, Sixth?” Izuku asks aloud, noting the shadows following him. “You’re never usually out for this long.”

There’s no response, surprisingly, and Izuku chances a quick glance behind him. En is nowhere to be seen. The other users haven’t appeared either.

It’s just Izuku out here, so why does he not feel alone?

There’s something sitting at the base of his skull. It starts a migraine and makes Izuku’s eyelids droop, which just pisses him off even more.

Because *why* is there something crawling around beneath his skin, tearing up his insides? Why do these shadows have eyes, and why is Izuku suddenly feeling so *small—?*

“You don’t feel like yourself, do you?”

Izuku stumbles and whips around, heart beating outside his chest. He can’t breathe due to the tightness in his throat now, because that—that almost sounded exactly like—

His hair moved. When the words were whispered in his ear, he felt his hair move too because of it. He felt it! He *felt it!*

But there’s no quirk signature near Izuku right now. There’s nothing, not even an animal. He is completely isolated on this high rooftop.

So what the fuck is happening?

Izuku spins around in frantic circles, eyes darting from place to place. One for All comes to his defense immediately, as if sensing the danger too.

“You said it yourself,” the voice continues, this time in the opposite ear. “You’ve changed.”

Izuku retreats with panicked breaths, still on high alert. His back hits a wall, and he slides down it with wide eyes. Yes, that’s right. This is

the same voice from before. The one he hasn't told All Might about yet. The one he listens to without thinking much at all. This time, though, he's trying to make sense of it.

The low voice moves around Izuku as the words go on. "I wonder. Is it because you're pretending to be someone else?"

Izuku trembles. He doesn't like it. He doesn't want to hear this. It just sounds so much like *him.*

His shaky fists find his hair, and he grasps the hairs at the base of his scalp. He tugs on them, needing the sting. He needs to feel it. He needs to reassure himself that he's here, on this random rooftop, and not there. He doesn't want to be there. He hasn't been there in so long that he's stupidly almost forgotten what it was like.

But now the memories have been dragged to the forefront of his mind, and there's no forgetting now.

Leave me alone, he thinks, but it's not a command or an order. It's framed like a question. Like he's pleading. And when was the last time he's begged for something like this? *Please, please. Not now.*

His vitals are probably getting strange. He doesn't need this patrol to be cut short. He doesn't want to have to explain to the others why he had to stop.

When he squeezes his eyes shut, a distorted face is what greets him. He jerks forward, now on his hands and knees in a puddle. One arm comes back up to grip his hair, and he doesn't mean for it to happen, really. He's so panicked that he doesn't think anything of how hard he's tugging on the roots until he pulls the hand away and sees a thick patch of green and white strands in his fist.

Oh. He just pulled out his fucking hair. How mature of him! He grips them until his knuckles turn white, now vibrating with rage. He can't believe this is happening again. He thought he was past it, the hallucinating, the unknown voices, this weakness. He thought he was doing good. But it seems that hearing a fake voice that sounds even remotely similar to Father can still—

Wait. White strands?

The universe tilts on its axis. Izuku's eyes flick down when he uncurls his fist, and there they are. Amidst the dark green hairs are unmistakable white ones. Strands that he pulled. From his hair.

He hovers over the puddle, his blood feeling so, so cold. Staring back at him is a pathetic looking boy with too many masks on his dirt-encrusted face. He tilts his head forward, and he can see them now. The small white patches of hair growing all throughout the thickest parts of his head, hiding beneath his more unruly curls.

He blinks, and Father's hand is reaching out. Izuku cries out and lets the hair in his hand flutter down, messing up the undisturbed puddle.

His chest hiccups, choking him. Frantic anger rushes through him, and he slams his hands down into the puddle, once again messing up the reflection. Then he grasps the patches of white on his head and tears. He tears and tears and then tears some more.

Again and again until there's no more white and he can only see green. His chest is still coiled up tight, and Izuku doesn't want to spring free. He feels like he's going to throw up. Or, even worse, cry.

It's so unlike him, that emotion. Izuku hasn't wanted to cry that badly since… that doesn't matter. He's just being dramatic. This is so disgusting of him, isn't it? The voice seems to be gone, so he needs to stop. He needs to shape up.

Izuku crosses the roof and pauses at the edge, slapping his cheeks in one quick movement to focus. So, he has little bald spots in his head now, but that's alright. He can cover them up with his longer curls. No one will know what happened unless Izuku moves a certain way. He'll have to be careful. Either way, though, he figures no one has noticed the white patches before or else they would've said something by now.

That's the only reassurance he has at the moment.

He takes a few minutes to pick out the splinters and little pieces of metal lodged in his thighs and arms. He was cut up pretty badly from the rocket explosion, but thankfully nothing hit too deep. He knows Yamada would still want him to go back to the apartment after all of that so they can see if he's alright or needs to go to a hospital, but Izuku doesn't want to go back. Not yet.

He'd get yelled at by Aizawa for sure if he finds out that Izuku didn't go back immediately, but to be fair Izuku has some more pressing matters to attend to before the night is over.

So, he quickly fixes himself up the best he can and even buys some first aid supplies from a nearby medical store since he forgot to bring

any with him. And that's more than what he *ever* would've done before. A year ago he would've just gone back to his apartment and slept off all of his injuries. His body would fight any possible infection, and most everything would heal by morning time. So Izuku never thought that doing that was a problem.

But things have to be done differently now. He understands that.

Izuku is nearly done with his extra lengthy patrol when he spots four masked individuals hanging around outside a restaurant. And not just any restaurant—Tony's Pizzeria.

Now, Izuku doesn't judge situations without knowing all the details first, and he also doesn't assume badly of people he doesn't know. But right here, Izuku can't help but be a little more alert. It's not that they're acting suspicious or anything, it's just that—

Izuku is moving at the first sight of the crowbars and bats being held in their fists. He's on the ground behind them in a split second, both his hands out to yank the weapons away from them. Before they can even process what's happening, Izuku has them facedown on the dirty concrete, and he wraps them all up together like a present using the last of his capture tape.

His feelings about what they were planning on doing are solidified when they all begin to curse and shout at him for stopping them from vandalizing the store. It's made apparent that they weren't just there to steal money—if that were the case, they would've just gone inside, as the pizzeria is still open.

Too pissed to even talk to them and much less hear them, Izuku tapes their mouths shut and brings them to a well-lit area a little bit down the road. He sends an alert for any police officers or pros in the area to come collect them, and after that he finds himself walking back towards the restaurant.

It's been a long time since he's been here. Guilt blooms inside him, making him wince. He needs to make sure Ms. Hanako and her family are still doing alright. He feels her quirk signature in there, but still. He needs to *see* her.

She's almost closed up. Izuku can see through the recently cleaned windows that she's in the middle of her closing duties, given by the supplies and bags out on the front counter and the mop sitting off to the side. After a brief moment of deliberation, he opens the door and hears the bells chime to signal his arrival.

He doesn't see her out here, but he bets she's somewhere in the kitchen. Her quirk signature grows even stronger at this realization, and he relaxes.

He's about to quickly peek inside the doorway just to see if she's doing alright and then leave when she quickly walks out from the back, holding a tray of recently cleaned parmesan shakers in her veiny hands.

"Have a seat wherever you like, dear, I'll be right with—" When she sees Izuku, *truly* sees him, she jumps hard. The tray she's holding shifts, and one of the glass shakers topples right off. It's only by instinct that he manages to grab it with Pull before it hits the ground.

Izuku shrinks back, instantly wary. He places the shaker on the counter and steps away, holding his hands up to show he means no harm. He's starting to regret walking in here. This is extremely dangerous, and not just for him.

Ms. Hanako's gaze flits back and forth from Izuku to the empty spaces around him, eyes wild. "You're—!"

"I'm so sorry," Izuku says, thankful his voice changer can hide his true voice. "Didn't mean to scare you, ma'am. I just wanted to make sure everything was alright. I'll go and—"

"No, no! You're alright! I'm sorry, you just…" The old lady swipes her forehead and then sets down her tray completely, steadying herself against the counter. "You've got some new ones following you around this time, that's all."

Izuku pauses. "New ones?"

"Nevermind me," she says, waving him off. "Would you like a chocolate milkshake? On the house!"

"Oh, you don't have—"

"It's no trouble at all," Ms. Hanako assures him, just as always. She turns away from him and goes to fix him a milkshake, getting out the whipped cream, chocolate drizzle, and cherry to top it all off.

Izuku stands there awkwardly, feeling like a little kid again, and can't help but stare as she makes it. It's weird to be in here as Rabbit and not Midoriya Izuku. He figured she would be hesitant to allow *Rabbit* in here, but apparently she doesn't mind him at all.

Or does she even realize who he is? He would think so, right? He wonders if she's been catching up with the news recently. Maybe his new costume is what's throwing her off.

"I heard some ruckus an hour or so ago," Ms. Hanako remarks, throwing a glance over her shoulder at him. "That wasn't you, was it? That explosion?"

Izuku flushes, shifting on his feet. He's surprised the woman even heard it, as it was pretty far away. "Er, unfortunately it was, but no civilians were hurt! It was all handled."

"Well, I'd expect nothing less from you." She sticks a straw in the milkshake and holds it out to him, her expression soft. "But it seems like *you* were hurt. Has it been a rough time? I can only imagine what it's like out there after these Nomu situations."

Izuku grimaces and gratefully accepts the milkshake, deciding he better not comment on that. He pulls out some bills that he's been keeping hidden away for these types of events, but she only laughs at him, not unkindly.

"Don't you give me any of that, sugar. Think of this as a thank you for keeping our insurance down and our streets safer." She smiles again and winks, already moving back to continue her closing duties. "Now, I won't keep you too long. You keep doing what you're doing."

Izuku thanks her profusely and tries to argue, but she's having none of it. She's always been so stubborn. Now that Izuku can really look at her, he notices that she's much thinner than before. She looks frailer, too. Exhaustion pulls at the corners of her lips and eyes, and he wishes he were able to do something about that. If he were Midoriya Izuku right now, he'd go back there and help her close so she wouldn't have to do all of that by herself, but he's not. He can't exactly help as Rabbit, as that would possibly put her in an even more difficult position. For now, he just dips his head in reply to her goodbye and leaves her the bills anyway in the tip jar when she's not looking.

He pulls open the door, memorizing the sound of the familiar bell, and hears her call out to him one last time.

"You're always welcome in this part of town, Rabbit. You come back whenever you like!" She's out of breath when she continues, and Izuku hurts even worse. "You make good company for little old ladies like me, dearie."

With that in mind, Izuku decides he *should* come back more often, and not just as Rabbit. He needs to get back into the habits he used to have as Midoriya Izuku, back before shit hit the fan. He might not have necessarily been as *happy* then as he is now, but he was definitely more free. It wouldn't hurt to create those routines again.

And the voice agrees.

Chapter End Notes

take a seismic breath. i know, you're tired. and i see that your desire is to stay, stay still

this one's pretty cool on yt: faced with fire—margaux

also is there anything y'all want to see specifically in this fic/au? anything you want more information on or something you'd like to see more attention given to? could be little angst/fluff/crack one shots or certain conversations between characters, etc. :)

this one was a slightly boring chap, but it was necessary to set some things up. next one will be much better I promise

n

from green to blue

Chapter Notes

i need a very long nap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re leaving,” Izuku says, and he’s looking at the wall in the back of the room, not feeling like meeting their eyes this time around. “Are we compromised?”

“No,” the first board member responds, her voice soft by nature. “But we have to go now if we want to keep it that way.”

Izuku drops his head. He counts the scuff marks on the tiled floor. He’s been in this exact spot so many times now that his shoe prints are clearly visible. The ground has two little grooves in it, marking the place where all the other past champions stood too.

He is only one in a line of hundreds.

“Where will you go?” He asks, fists clenched tightly behind his back.

The man in blue sitting at the far left of the curved table taps his fingers against the glass. “Where we always go. We never move far, Rabbit. We’re only a shadow away.”

It’s not the answer Izuku wanted, and the board member must know that, but that doesn’t make him elaborate. Izuku shoulders the weight of their gazes and blows out a slow breath. “If I need you, how should I contact you? I take it that direct messaging will no longer be a safe option.”

“You won’t need us for a while yet. But even if you do need to contact us,” the man in a red dress shirt responds, “you’ll know how to do it when the time comes.”

Izuku doesn’t hide his eye roll. He’s not a fan of their theatrics and riddles. Not this time. He doesn’t voice these thoughts, though. He only crosses his arms, head tilting to the side. He sees the way their eyes linger on his newest set of cuts and bruises. “You won’t disclose it to me.”

The five members making up the Club’s official board pause and

glance at one another. Their silence is answer enough.

Izuku grits his teeth. “I can guard you.”

“No need,” the fourth member tells him. “You have your own affairs to tend to, which is why you’re here, right?”

The prompt is clear: forget about it and move on.

Izuku takes a deep breath and walks closer to them, having to look up a little to face them directly. “I’ve gathered the information you asked for on Overhaul. I think I have a sufficient amount to bring to our anonymous hero partners. They’ll have no choice but to react publicly.”

The head of the board leans forward, and his face is still mostly shadowed. “Our ties with 70% of our partners have been severed since the recent events at Hosu. Because of this, I’m afraid we cannot go that route this time around.”

Izuku falters. “They backed out? Why? I thought Hosu would have the opposite effect. With everyone crying Nomu left and right, you’d think the heroes would turn to us for some more insight.”

The first member snaps her fingers, a white gleam to her eye. “That was my thought, too. I’m guessing they’re too overwhelmed to deal with the likes of us.”

“Oh, please, they’re most likely scared shitless,” Red adds. “They don’t want the added weight of being involved with us on their conscience, especially now with the growing public distrust in heroes.”

Blue rubs his forehead, leaving small needle marks in his wake. “We’re better off forgetting about them.”

This makes Izuku take another step forward, mouth dropping open. “You mean you want me to skip out on getting reinforcements? But the—the files. Didn’t you see the files I sent over? We need *help* to take down Overhaul. I mean, not only can he turn ten times his size, but he has a bunch of B-tier villains as his henchmen. We need the heroes’ support for this one!”

“We have a wide range of forces,” the fourth member counters, “though I specifically remember you being told to only gather information on this case. It isn’t your assignment to bring Overhaul in. You do remember he is the Yakuza heir, yes?” He doesn’t wait for the

boy's reply. "We are not in a position to challenge them so soon after the recent societal upheaval."

Izuku is momentarily stunned. All respect flies out the window the moment his brain catches up to the words being spoken. "You want me to let this go?"

The first member stands from her chair and steps down the little platform to refill her cup at the drinking station. It's some fruity cocktail that Izuku forgot the name of—but he does remember the taste. The woman turns back to Izuku with a second, albeit much smaller drink in hand for him. It barely counts as a shot.

Izuku is about to take it when he remembers exactly what's in it. He hesitates, his hand—slightly trembling now—hanging in the air. Before he can think much of it, the glass is lifted from the woman's hands easily with cloud-like discs and set back on the table.

"Shieri," Red says in exasperation, letting his quirk fly back into him, "remind yourself of his age, please."

The woman's head snaps to look at her partner. "The kid deserves to let loose once in a while. He's killed for us before, anyhow, so why keep acting like he's—"

"I know it's difficult," the head of the board interrupts, his eyes only on Izuku, "to do all of that research and spend so much time watching, only to step away from it all and have to forget it. But I need you to understand that if we push forward with this assignment now, people will die."

Izuku stands up straight, gaze fiery. "More people will lose their lives if we sit in hiding, which is why I'm now proposing that we take this to other heroes. I can form new partnerships. I can get us the support we need." The promise burns his tongue. He grips his shirt with his fist. "If Overhaul succeeds, there's no telling what will happen next. We have to act soon if we're planning to at all."

Blue lifts up a shoulder and proceeds to light a cigarette. "Eh. I gotta agree with the kid."

The fourth member shakes his head. "I understand what you're meaning, Rabbit, but as we discussed, we'll be leaving shortly. We won't be able to oversee the sections in this district anymore."

It's like lightning strikes at the very middle of Izuku's core. The boy

jumps at the admission before anyone else can speak over him. “If you won’t be running these divisions, who will?”

The question hangs in the air. It’s heavy, and Izuku bears it with a quiet ferocity. The other members glance towards the head of the table, and the atmosphere turns expectant.

“Traditionally,” the man begins, sounding lower than Izuku’s ever heard him, “the most recent champions of the district would fight for the title as temporary speaker. But given that you and Ms. Kaida are the only remaining living ones out of the bunch, and also that she stepped down from her role by choice, we figure you’re the only one physically capable.”

For the first five seconds, Izuku doesn’t really register what the head is truly offering him. But then the ringing in his ears stops and his muscles relax and he can breathe again. “You want me to run Club business for this district?”

Red smiles. “Sounds crazy, right?”

Shieri clasps her hands together after taking another sip of her drink. “Not like you haven’t already been helping to do that.”

It’s almost too good to be true. Does Izuku really want that? Does he want that power? He will have to attend more meetings. He will be bombarded with questions and concerns from all members asking for changes or whatnot. He will be responsible for every little mistake and every little success.

Isn’t this exactly what his teachers wanted to stop him from doing?

“Being in control means you can make your own decisions for your subdivisions. You wouldn’t need permission.” The head blinks at him, face neutral. “This also means you can form whatever new relationships you’d like with certain heroes of choice.”

And there it is. The bait.

The fourth member hums. “I bet you’ve already got someone in mind.”

With the spotlight back on him, Izuku clears his throat and dives into his next report, knowing that’s where they’re headed. “A short while ago, I was approached with an ultimatum.” When no one shows any reaction, Izuku presses onward. “The number three hero, Hawks,

brought me a message directly from the Public Safety Commission. Long story short, they want me as an agent."

The head of the board crosses one ankle over the other. The other members stir a little but otherwise remain quiet.

Izuku breathes in deeply once more. "I was… wondering… if that would be something that you would…"

"Support?" The head offers, not unkindly.

The boy shivers and nods. "I know the associated risks, believe me. But I… I believe I could unite our groups. I know our relationship with the Commission has never been great, and our truce was fragile at best, especially given what Hawks did recently at this location, but you admitted it yourself: change is coming. And I do wholeheartedly think that something truly *good* can come out of this."

Shieri frowns. "What are they offering you exactly?"

"Training, resources, money, high tech, fame, public trust, stability, a way to end the war with them—everything." Izuku has to stop himself from wavering. "If I do as they say for just a short period of time, I'd get the world as payment. I would be allowed to stay associated with the Club, so there's no worries there. We would be recognized not as a criminal's organization, but as a private civilian group fighting for a better, more just, more *accepting* future. And we wouldn't be allies exactly, I know, but we would be safer than ever before with the Commission at our beck and call, all at my request."

Blue huffs a little, and smoke leaves his mouth from the cigarette. "What makes you think they'd listen to you like that?"

"They obviously need him for something," Red responds seriously, glancing at the other members. "If they're bold enough to have Hawks ask him directly, then I'm certain they want Rabbit for something they can't otherwise get."

"Exactly," Izuku points out even though he feels like he's about to fall over any second. "To avoid me backing out, I know there must be some leeway to the things I can request. They have the resources to help, so they wouldn't have any reason to deny me, not if it's for a heroic cause, anyway."

The fourth member isn't convinced. "To stop you from backing out they would just kill you."

“He’s too well-known,” Shieri cuts in. “The world would know it the moment it happened, even if they tried to make up some half-assed lie like they did with Lady Nagant.”

“So they’re willingly taking a gamble by asking him to join?” Blue asks, looking annoyed even at the mention of the ex-hero.

“It’s not a gamble when they know he’ll concede.”

Everyone turns their attention back to the head of the table, who is now facing the side wall in his spinning chair, one finger pressed against his cheekbone as he thinks.

Izuku clears his throat and nods again. “They want to use me, and they know I want to use them. It’s not a secret on either side. The question is just how far they’re going to allow me to push if I do join.”

“That’s something you’d have to learn with experience,” the fourth member remarks grimly.

And who knows what that kind of experience will do to Izuku.

Another long, tiresome moment passes by, and Izuku watches cigarette smoke dissipate once it leaves Blue’s mouth.

The head of the board turns back, his skin shimmering in the faint light. “Do what you feel is needed, Rabbit. You’ve held us in good hands for as long as you’ve been here. I trust you can decide this by yourself. But just remember that now you’re responsible for the entirety of this district. Keep them in mind always.”

Izuku’s throat tightens, and his next words feel final. “Yes, sir.”

He opens his mouth again but closes it just as quickly. He wants to say thanks, to tell the board just how grateful he is that they allowed him, the apprentice of the very *real* hero killer, under their care just a few years ago. He doesn’t know where he’d be without them. He doesn’t know where he’d be without their knowledge and care.

But the words die on the tip of his tongue, so he settles for a small dip of his head, and the head of the board returns it.

“Don’t look so somber,” Shieri says, holding up her chin with a palm. “It’s like we said, we won’t be far.”

Right. He just needs to look in the shadows and he’ll find them.

Somehow it's not as comforting as it should be.

Izuku turns on his heel, heading for the door.

"Rabbit."

The head's voice is as quiet as always. Izuku feels the air shift, and he pauses, not turning around yet. He didn't know regret could have a flavor like his.

"Have you forgotten where you came from?"

The boy blinks, his expression unchanging. He calms his breathing down once more. Although the head's voice is quiet, it's rough from years of smoking and strain from his quirk. Izuku exhales slowly, shakily.

He thinks of gaping hands reaching for him out of puddles and long green hair shining in the sun. "No."

"Then you must know that joining the ranks of those heroes won't change you one bit." No one else says anything, not that Izuku expects them to. "Going in this direction won't rid you of the monsters you keep for company."

Thunder rumbles overhead, and a flash of light spreads throughout the room. It paints Izuku's shadow on the wall before him, and if he looked he would see wings there—multiple sets of them. He would see eyes, rows and rows of them. Large creatures from the void make a home out of hovering over his shoulders, their uncanny limbs wrapping around him tight, too scared to let go.

Izuku glances back and meets the head member's eyes in the darkness. He's a good ten feet away from him, but that doesn't mean he can't see the extra black ring formed around his pupils. "Why would I need to get rid of them?"

The man only smiles and turns away again. "That'll be all from us, Rabbit. Before accepting their invitation, I advise you to just remind yourself what will happen if you ever decide to resign from their ranks. And also consequently what will happen if you resign from us."

Izuku leaves with the weight of those words on his shoulders.

He's been finding himself in front of his father's realm more and more often.

It happens when he's upset, he finds. More specifically, when he's feeling guilty about something. For example, Yamada gave him that little sigh of his and furrowed his eyebrows in that specific *I'm disappointed in you but I'm not going to say it* way when Izuku arrived back at the apartment twenty minutes after the time he agreed on with Aizawa.

Thankfully he had a good excuse: he was hungry.

But tonight is different.

Whereas Izuku went to sleep feeling guilty and exhausted from his patrol then and woke up to the voices beckoning him in, this time around Izuku doesn't hear anything.

The pull, however, is still there. It's like this realm has a magnet that only works on Izuku. He just can't stay away. Even when he's trying his hardest to ignore it, to distract himself, his feet end up here one way or another.

He feels bad, he really does, and he knows it's wrong, but what else can he do?

"Creepy, isn't it?"

Izuku doesn't look at Second. He's seen him around before, walking and walking and walking to seemingly nowhere, but he's never talked with him. He wanted to, at least a small part of himself did, but he also knew Second wanted nothing to do with him.

Until now, it looks like.

Izuku knows he can't judge the man. As the second user of One for All, he was one of the first to face off against All for One in his prime and consequently be destroyed for it. Second knows things about All for One that maybe even Izuku doesn't.

So why would Izuku blame Second for hating his murderer's son? It's

probably the most logical thing in the world.

Izuku stares into the depths of his father's realm. "No."

Second crosses his arms. He's leaning against the invisible wall of the realm as if he's not worried at all about the contents within. Why would he be? He can't go inside anyway, so it can't hurt him yet.

"'Course you would say that," Second bites. Izuku takes the bait and glances at him. He is much taller than Izuku, and he's bulky too. Thick, ridged scars cross the center of his face and outline his cheekbones, and when he continues, Izuku notices that his jaw moves a little weird, almost as if it's been broken before. "It calls to you, right?"

"First hears it too," Izuku says, as if defending himself.

"But he can't go in like you can. So why don't you?"

"He told me not to."

Second tips his head. "Since when do you listen to anything anyone says to you?"

Izuku narrows his eyes as the realization of what he could do dawns on him. He's suddenly less unsure. Second's words are cold, sure, but not *ice* cold. Cold like an untouched wall in the middle of the night.

"First is different," he breathes out.

"Why? Because you're blood?" Second lets out a small scoff and looks at him through half-lidded eyes. "You have no reason to listen."

"Is this a test?" Izuku whispers, now back to staring through the veil. He can see inside of the realm, he can feel how much it wants him, how much he needs it, but his skin is prickling and his heart is racing. He tries hard to not listen, to stop entertaining this idea of his when his own uncle forbade him from it, but Second's words are egging him on.

Second pushes off the wall and stands over Izuku, and his quirk settles over the boy's body like water enveloping him whole. "The only test here is of your intentions. If you wanna prove you're serious about this," the man says, eyes like coal, "well, he's right in there."

He's in there. He is *inside* there. The permission to go inside is all

Izuku wanted before, and he honestly didn't care who it came from.

Izuku's breath is suspended. He feels in between both worlds—One for All and All for One. He senses the multitude of quirks on the other side and also the quirks residing inside himself.

He steps closer and raises a hand, letting his fingers pass through the electrifying veil, in and out. He goes all the way to the elbow before pulling away, as it's suddenly so much scarier than the first time he did it.

He squeezes his eyes shut and drops the hand. He wants to go inside, he feels like he needs to, but he can't. There's no telling how the other users would react. There's no telling what'll happen to him if something bad does happen inside there.

If Izuku is in trouble, he'll be alone, as no one else can enter.

Izuku turns on his heel and stalks past Second, not sparing him a glance. He wants to find All Might. His ghostly form should be somewhere near Shimura's realm at this time. He needs him right now.

The dead man's eyes track him all the way.

Death has a certain sound, and though it's hard to explain, everyone surely knows it.

The soft sigh of a breath, the last beat of a heart, and the brittle snap of bone as a spine inverts from a tragic accident are all sounds of death. Crying, wailing, whimpering, begging—those are too.

All for One's favorite sound denoting death, however, isn't even really a sound at all.

It's nothingness.

When someone is alive, their limbs are moving and their blood is flowing and their lungs are expanding. Everything is in motion, and, with good enough hearing, it can all be heard. But when someone has

died, when they've moved for the final time and their body has slowed down near completely, time stands still.

And all that's left of the person is silence.

While he loves to listen to the song of death, All for One isn't quite so enthused with the stench of it. Drying blood is one of his least favorite smells, second only to peach perfume. Decaying flesh is a close third.

Life would be so much easier if death was quicker, wouldn't it? If humans could skip the whole aftermath and just fade out of existence, things would be much more simple for All for One.

But he isn't one to complain about the way things are. He's good at dealing with the cards in his hand. He only wishes that villains would stop being so carefree with their murders.

Despite what some of his past victims might say, All for One doesn't take pleasure in killing for fun. It's a waste, in his own fine opinion. He'd much rather kill to send a message or to mold his plans even further. It's only right.

Does this mean that he would go out of his way to save someone? No. That's not All for One's business. If it's their time, it's their time.

The world continues to spin on its axis as he walks the edge of the beach Kurogiri has so graciously brought him to.

It's a weird feeling, being able to see again. Naturally, that is. With actual eyes.

He never lost his ability to see if you consider the fact that he had many quirks enabling him to map out his surroundings in terms of depth, energy, and brightness. But he can't lie and say he was never annoyed by the fact that he lost his natural sight. It was his own mistake, but today he's finally rectified it.

After years of trying, All for One has finally figured it out. He's succeeded.

Even with all of the healing quirks in the world, all the ones he stole, he was never able to fully regenerate his face. All Might did too much damage that day, in all honesty. All for One was almost surprised.

But now, with the new regenerative blood that he and Garaki formulated, All for One can not only see again, but he can smell

through a nose. He can feel the wind against his face, which is no longer rough and twisted and numb.

He can walk and breathe without any more treatments. He can be anywhere, do anything.

Once again, All for One is reborn, and he's stronger than ever. He feels like he's a hundred years old again.

He's brought from his thoughts when a stark white rabbit stops to sniff at his dress shoes. Here, at Rabbit Island, not even All for One is alone.

More of them follow the first, all emerging from the bushes and shades of trees, and they surround him. They're cute, he'll admit. Thick, long whiskers jut out from their mouth, twitching ever so often in time with their curiosity. Some are brown and black, while others have intricate patterns and splotches of autumn colors.

All for One crouches down to scratch them, not minding how the sand gets on his pants.

It's ironic, really. How he kills people who aren't even bad and has to wash away the blood. And yet here he is, talking to the many wild rabbits on this beach, smiling brightly and even picking one up to hold towards the blazing sun. They don't know that his hands were stained red just before this, and they never will.

A cold chill washes over All for One, making the man hum and cradle the rabbit to his chest. "My son is always missing out," he says, and Kurogiri moves forward, his dark purple and black clouds following along.

"He will realize this," his servant says, though it's not quite reassuring.

All for One sighs. "See, but you always say that. Izuku is more stubborn than even I, so I doubt he'll come around soon. It's been years of this childishness now." He turns his attention back to the creature, who has its eyes closed as All for One rubs its chest. "Do you think he needs reinforcement, Kurogiri?"

He receives no response, not that he was looking for one.

"Wait until my dear boy learns that it was because of him that I'm alive again." All for One sets the rabbit down and steps into the

waves, although the salt water doesn't touch him at all. It all moves around him, stopping and broiling just an inch from his body. "He is the key to everything, and he doesn't even realize it. Salvation lies in his blood, and he's so selfish to keep it all to himself. He really is my perfect miracle." Gazing out into the distant waters and eyeing where he knows the mainland of Japan is, All for One waves a hand at the man behind him. "Kuro, tell me what he allowed us to do again. I'm quite forgetful nowadays."

"His genetic makeup perfected the designs of the Nomu," Kurogiri recalls, voice a low rumble. "Considering his relation to you, the information held in Young Master's blood was also able to—"

"—heal me beyond what I thought was possible," he finishes for him in false enthusiasm.

"Yes."

All for One basks in the warmth of the sun, relishing in the way he can actually feel the sweat dripping down his now smooth skin. His curly hair, as white as some of the rabbits below him, whips away in the sea breeze.

But then another chill reaches him, and All for One is happier than ever.

"This place is stupid," comes his other son's disgusted voice somewhere behind.

"Ah, Tomura," All for One greets, turning with open arms. "I see you made it safely! This island is just beautiful, isn't it?"

Tomura's face pinches in disgust upon seeing All for One's look, but he has the sense not to bring up his feelings on the matter once more. He's still not used to seeing the man's healed body.

"Why did you ask him to bring me here? I was in the middle of doing something," Tomura growls, his eyes shadowed. His hand reaches up to scratch lightly behind his neck, but he doesn't do it for nearly as long as he used to. He's been learning how to manage it.

Tomura's white hair is getting longer and longer, and All for One is almost proud.

The family is really coming together.

“Things are moving at a much faster rate now, Tomura,” he says as a way of explanation. “You’ll have all the time in the world to live how you want after we finish this. Remember what I told you must be done in our near future in order for us to succeed in our goals.”

Tomura only looks away and grumbles something about only having been told a thousand times already under his breath. The young man stalks back towards the shade, and All for One’s smile grows even wider, bleached white teeth glinting in the blazing sun.

“Your chance to show them who you truly are is coming, dear boy. You must be prepared, and you can’t falter.” He puts a finger to his temple, and red tendrils erupt from his spine just out of annoyance from not being let out in a while. His quirks simultaneously purr and rage beneath his skin, and he lets some more of them out, liking the way that his body isn’t affected by the strain one bit.

Oh, he nearly forgot what being this godly felt like.

When Tomura doesn’t respond, All for One glides closer, and the rabbits follow with chattering teeth. “Don’t you want to show them what they created?”

Tomura meets his gaze again, and red understands red. The hunger in his eyes is so clear and palpable that All for One could almost feed on it. The desperate need to prove himself, to hurt everyone who was ever involved in hurting him, to come out on top and become more than he was ever taught he could be—it’s all sitting there behind those bitter expressions.

And All for One can’t wait to see it all unfold once more.

“No matter what you see,” the very real king of the underground whispers, “no matter what you hear, you will focus only on what your duty is. Won’t you, Tomura?”

“Yes,” is the irritated response he receives. But it’s a promise all the same. All for One can feel it in his bones.

Tomura barks something to Kurogiri about taking him back to where he picked him up from, and All for One doesn’t make any objections when the wispy portal is released.

He doesn’t feel the need to press Tomura anymore than he already has. He’s confident that he’ll do well. Neither of them would ever agree, probably, but All for One thinks then that both of his sons are

even more bloodthirsty than he is.

They both have different reasons for it, of course, but using a knife to spread butter on toast doesn't change its nature.

But before his oldest can retreat back to his dwelling, All for One calls out to him, as he's honestly not sure if he'll get to see him again before it happens. "Oh, and please make sure to use your quirk for it. I'm sure you have no qualms about that, yes? It must be quick, you know. It's only right."

Tomura scoffs at the reminder and just storms off through the inky blackness, not replying. And then it's just All for One, the rabbits, and Kurogiri.

Huh. Maybe time has made All for One softer.

He returns to his task of watching the sea, plotting out his next ideas and tasks. He can't say there's not a tiny part of him that wishes this all wasn't needed, but as the future ruler of a new world, he needs to be able to make these sacrifices.

She'll understand, he knows. She always did.

Shimura Nana doesn't consider herself someone who revolves her life around drama. She never cared much about gossip or teenage angst when she was in school, no. Granted, during those times there was never really time for that stuff, so that's not really an accurate judgment for anything.

She did enjoy the occasional inside joke and always made a point to be happy and upbeat, but was she nosy? Not really.

This is also why Nana hasn't really entered the homes of the other users very much. It's not that she doesn't feel welcome in them, as that's quite the opposite, it's just that she doesn't want to go looking through someone's memories. Invading memories about All for One or specifically regarding One for All is one thing, but looking through personal memories?

It's another thing entirely, and she's not comfortable with that. Hell,

she's barely comfortable with looking through her own past. All she sees are lies and mistakes and regrets, and there's nothing she can do now to rectify them or change those outcomes, which just makes it all hurt worse.

The point is, Nana doesn't make a habit of watching other people's private memories, as she respects the boundaries of all her fellow One for All users.

Well, all but one.

Midoriya Izuku is a special case. Not only is he the most recent holder of One for All and thus the one they all have to be paying attention to alongside Toshinori, but he's—obviously—the son of their enemy.

Each little memory or thought of Izuku's, even if it has little connection to All for One directly, still holds information that could be vital in figuring out how to finish this once and for all.

Izuku is exactly who they needed. It's ironic, of course, as he's probably the most anti-One for All person just by blood and childhood alone. But Nana wouldn't trade him out for any other successor. He's perfect. The others have their doubts sometimes, and she has to listen to Third and Second's quiet, scathing arguments about whether or not to trust Izuku enough to let him inside their realms, but she doesn't care.

She knows in the very core of her being that Toshinori chose right.

Sometimes, though, she can't help but feel bad. Because sitting here and watching Izuku's most horrid memories after traveling this deep inside his realm to find them is one of the hardest things she's ever had to do. And considering that she had to abandon her son once upon a time, that's saying something.

She's been watching these memories for an unknown period of time. Here, everything is altered. But what she does know is that there are way too many hateful memories in this place for a child so young.

The scenery before her shifts, and another vision begins. She's in the middle of it all, but as always she remains unseen.

Izuku is crying so hard that his entire body is shaking. He falls to the ground, elbows smacking against concrete, and he begs between hiccups for a chance to do it all over again.

He is seven years old, just about, but just by glancing at him you'd think he was even younger.

Blood trickles down his nose, and Nana notices that blood smears on the ground where he places his palms.

All for One is angry, and even though it's just a memory, even though it's in the past and Izuku isn't in any real danger anymore, Nana still feels her hairs begin to rise and her muscles tense.

She is already dead, but her instincts never leave her.

"Do you enjoy failing? Is that why you continue to disappoint me like this?" All for One's voice is as condescending as ever, but there's an obvious fiery edge to the words now. He is a large, looming shadow, and he walks after Izuku as the boy continues to frantically scramble away. There are thick rubber gloves discarded somewhere in the far corner of the room.

Nana knows by now from her previous memory-watchings that they belong to Izuku.

Izuku lets out a strangled noise when he's picked up easily. All for One's hand grabs the entirety of the boy's face so easily, and he grips the boy's chin tightly to ensure he's looking at him. "I asked you a question, so you need to answer me. Do you like being weak? Do you think this is acceptable? You think you're *hero* material, Izuku?"

Nana's chest constricts. She takes a deep breath in and then lets it go.

"No!" Izuku cries, and he's kicking his feet, eyes overflowing with more tears. He has to shut them to keep them from escaping. Nana can only guess what would happen if he continued to show such weakness. "No, no, no, I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

All for One shakes his head, tutting darkly. "I told you before that if I needed to revisit this topic again so soon, I'd use my other quirks on you, didn't I? Didn't I say that?" His red gaze sharpens when he notices his son's eyes are still closed. "Midoriya Izuku, you will *look at me when I'm talking to you—"*

Honestly, Nana doesn't know how it happens. There are no thoughts in the boy's brain. At least, none that she can hear or rationalize. Nana just watches it all unfold with parted lips, unable to breathe anymore.

Izuku grows even more frantic upon being reminded of the threat. He

writhes, sobbing for real now, and his little hands reach up to grab onto his father's cheeks. A bright crimson light expands from his palms and wreaths quickly around the villain that is his father. It happens in less than a second.

It sounds similar to an electric shock, like what you'd hear when a bug flies into a zapper. All for One grunts in pain and sheer surprise, and in the same second he drops Izuku back to the floor, who continues to scramble away with wide, bloodshot eyes.

Nana moves along with him, her senses screaming at her despite her being unable to do anything.

For what feels like the longest time but what could only be a few seconds at most, All for One is silent, as if momentarily too stunned to react. He touches a finger to his cheek where Izuku grabbed him, and it comes away bloody. There's a huge burn mark resting on both cheeks now, and it's glaringly painful.

Izuku is busy babbling even more apologies, his face covered in dirt and snot and tears. His pleas hurt Nana's chest.

All for One laughs, and it's a scary sound. It's hearty, genuine, yet guttural.

He walks to Izuku and crouches before him, reaching out to place a hand on his head. "Oh, my dear boy. How *brilliantly* naïve you are. So young and so stupidly powerful." He leans close, bitter breath swishing against Izuku's bruising face. "I'll let you in on a little secret. To be able to use that power against me, you have to *really* need it."

His large hand falls lower to grab his chin, gripping it tight like before. Nana notices the way Izuku's chest shutters, as if having to stop his own loud cries. There's a spark in those watery green eyes now—a glimmer of hope. Like he wants the praise, the information, the tips. Like he doesn't know what else he'll be allowed.

"So," All for One tells him, his voice sickly sweet, "the next time you dare try and take from me like that again, make sure you *mean it."*

Nana is left standing in the middle of the void as the memory dissipates and fades into another one. They're all out of order, so she gets whiplash every time.

This time, Izuku is a little older and currently rampaging in a bare room. The bed in the corner tells Nana that this is his sleeping area,

not that it looks much like a typical child's room.

"I don't get it!" He says aloud, the words watery and hard. "Why does he hate me so much? Why doesn't he give me a chance?"

The wispy man Nana has come to know as Kurogiri sits on the bed, watching with neutral yellow eyes.

Izuku wipes his nose and continues his pacing around the room, his bandages fists clenching and unclenching. "Why do those heroes matter more to him?"

"Master has a lot of plans, Izuku," Kurogiri rumbles.

"Yeah, but—but he—he never tells me any of them! He just says to train more! And I'm never enough. I can *never* be enough for him. He's disappointed in everything I do! I can't stand it. I'm—I'm just… I try so hard to be what he wants, and it's still—it's still shit!"

Kurogiri sighs, but it sounds more like a hum. "You can never be what he wants, Young Master. You shouldn't live your life trying to reach that line."

Izuku gesticulates wildly, his cheeks a dark red. "But what else is there to do? What else can I do to make him—to make him care!"

"He does care."

"Then where is he!" The shout comes out bitter and raw, and Nana sits on the bed beside Kurogiri, wrapping her arms around herself. "If he cared, he wouldn't—he—he wouldn't be so—so—!" He cuts himself off again with a frustrated scream. "Kuro, did you see what he did to Tomura this morning? Did you see it? It's not fair. He's never fair."

"Young Master."

Izuku trips and steadies himself just in time before he can faceplant. He leans against a wall and slides down it, covering his face. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm so angry. It's just…" He brings his knees to his chest, and the fresh cuts on his hands and legs has Nana's brain rushing. Izuku's shoulders shake as he attempts to subdue the crying. "It hurts. So bad. Why? *Why* does he hate them more than he loves me?"

Kurogiri stands and kneels to be eye level with Izuku. "You know he has plans that not even we can disrupt."

The boy peeks up at him, eyes red rimmed and skin wet. “He doesn’t love us at all, does he? He’s a liar.”

Nana and Izuku both wait for Kuro’s response, Izuku with desperation and Nana with a heartbroken sort of fury. But Kurogiri doesn’t answer. He only stares at Izuku, his cold mist continuously moving around him. After a few seconds, Izuku puts his head back into his knees in defeat, and Kurogiri reaches forward to take a hold of his wrist. He twists it, looking at his palm. There’s a fresh, angry red wound in the center of it, and Kurogiri quickly checks the boy’s other palm to see a matching one.

Izuku jerks them away, but it’s already been seen.

“You burned yourself again.” It’s not a question. Kurogiri sighs. “Master will be displeased when he sees them.”

“He’ll live,” Izuku huffs, and then in a lower voice mutters, “not like he can see anyway.”

“He may live, but you might not.” Kurogiri stands. “You will stay here until you’ve calmed yourself, Izuku. I’ll collect you for dinner.”

“As if I have anywhere else to go,” the boy whispers.

Kurogiri pauses by the door and looks like he wants to say something, but he ends up leaving without another word.

Izuku’s shoulders shake even more.

Sometimes, Nana wonders how many times Izuku was left like this to figure these things out by himself. Another part of herself doesn’t want to know the number, as it will never feel quite right anyway.

“Are you alright?”

Nana turns with a start, and Yoichi is standing there, one half of his face covered with stark white hair. She didn’t even hear him approaching. “Huh? Why wouldn’t I be?”

The boy—no, he’s a man, right? Even though he’s still younger than all of the other users besides Izuku, he’s gone through enough to be considered a man. He gestures lightly to Nana’s cheeks, and it’s only then that the woman feels the wetness dripping down.

“Oh, shit.” She wipes the tears away and goes back to watching the

memory reel. Yoichi sits down beside her. “I didn’t even know I could cry in here.”

“It happens,” he responds simply.

He’s so small next to her. Nana always feels a little awkward somehow when she’s right beside him. He’s always been someone she has respected greatly, if only from the stories her master told her of Yoichi and of everything he started, but now that she’s *met* him and has talked with him many, many times, she holds even more deep respect for him.

They both watch the memories in silence, and this time Izuku is young and toothy grinned as he grabs onto the skirt of his tired mother.

Nana softens at the sight. “He just reminded me of someone I knew,” she explains, even though she knows Yoichi wasn’t expecting elaboration.

He doesn’t look at her for a long moment, but when he does, she gets the feeling he knows exactly who she’s referring to. “He seems to have that effect on most of us.”

“Yeah.” Her face splits into a shit-eating grin, nearly matching that of the little Izuku being portrayed in front of them. “You know what I noticed? It’s almost like the kid is a perfect combination of all of us. How lucky is that?”

Yoichi concedes with a nod. “He has a lot of our strengths, but some of our weaknesses too.”

She turns, brows furrowed. “Such as?”

“Well, he’s incredibly stubborn, for one.”

Nana laughs abruptly. “And who do you think *that* came from? That could be Banjou, Toshi, En, or even you.”

“I was thinking it was more from you, actually.”

“What!” Nana knocks him in the shoulder—gently, all things considering. She sways where she’s sitting and presses an honest hand to her chest. “That ain’t me, I’ll tell you that!”

Yoichi only smiles, and Nana notes how his gaze goes back to watching the scenes playing out. Except he doesn’t really look at

Izuku, no. Yoichi's focus is on the mother, Midoriya Inko, because then the room shifts and the both of them get to learn why this memory is considered a bad one in Izuku's mind.

In between the glimpses of happy scenes are abrupt, staticky ones that take Nana by surprise no matter how much she tries to prepare herself.

Midoriya Inko, Nana quickly learns, was something of a monster herself.

The woman is leaning against the wall of the kitchen, back against multiple cabinets. The knobs must be digging into her spine, but she doesn't move. Izuku is being held tightly in her grip, pulled against her, and he's barely visible. Nana can only see one of his eyes, and she doesn't like how empty it seems.

There's a flash of metal, and Midoriya Inko's knife is clearly present now. She's holding it so tightly in one hand that her entire body is shaking with the strain. She's not pointing it at or threatening Izuku with it, no. Instead, she's pointing it out into the rest of the apartment, her green eyes wild and red.

Her lips are moving, talking to things no one else can see, and her body is strung tight.

Nana can't help herself from reaching out to try and put her hand on the back of Izuku's head. He's silent yet awake, and his fear is palpable. A bout of protectiveness overcomes Nana, and it's so strong that it nearly overwhelms her entirely.

Her hand passes through him, as expected, and Nana sighs.

Yoichi doesn't sound judgmental whatsoever when he speaks next. "You mustn't get too attached, Nana."

She doesn't react—not outwardly, at least. She continues watching the flashing memories, her previous joy now completely gone. Izuku is now a small boy tugging on his mother's pant leg and pointing up at the All Might figurine in the window, his hands tightly gloved and layered.

Nana sees his reflection in the window and commits his bright eyes and messy hair to mind. She squeezes her eyes shut sometime in the middle of it all, too emotionally exhausted to watch any more. "You're one to talk, Yoichi. You come in here more than all of us combined."

“Because I need to see what he has,” comes his easy answer. “He’s the only one here who’s had such long interactions with my brother and survived.”

She fists her pants with her hands. “He’s your nephew.”

“I know.”

Blond hair and eager blue eyes pop to the forefront of her thoughts. “Getting attached isn’t a bad thing. He needs support if we want this to work.”

“I didn’t say we shouldn’t support him.” Yoichi’s expression is dull and sad and somehow comforting all the same. “But we must recognize that it will only hurt him more if we allow ourselves to get too close.” His brows furrow. “You know how this will end, Nana. For all of us.”

“All Might.”

Fiery heat licks up Nana’s legs, singeing the ends of her cape. All for One’s presence is a parasite at the base of her skull. Here, he’s all she can feel. He’s all she can hear.

Her student has long since faded from her vision, but she can still sense the remains of their fragile connection deep inside her. It’ll be gone soon, but it’s no matter, because she knows Toshinori is stronger than she ever was.

“I leave it to you,” she breathes, and it’s a decree, a law, a promise.

When she dies, she’s not smiling. Only All for One is.

And maybe that’s something she regrets even now.

Nana gets to her feet and leaves, heading back in the direction where she knows the exit to Izuku’s realm is. It’ll be a long, long walk, but she has a lot to think about. Her cape swishes behind her, and it annoys her, so she wills it away with just another thought. “Yeah,” she says to Yoichi. “I do.”

She’s spent so long mulling over how this is bound to end that sometimes she has to remind herself she’s already dead and can do close to nothing.

All she can do is support the current successors using this plane, and it’ll never, ever be enough for her.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Yoichi calls after her, unmoving from his

spot. But he doesn't sound surprised or even regretful.

"You didn't," she says simply, because in a way it's true. In another way, however, it really isn't.

Nana leaves Yoichi behind with the untouched memories of his kin.

Chapter End Notes

> y'all have probs heard this one before but I was listening to this while writing some sad izuku scenes for future chaps so here you go :) ava - famy
>
> u

realignment

Chapter Notes

beginning of ACT IV

im sorry for the extended wait y'all. though I'm happy to say that next chap is gonna be absolutely wonderful for Izuku. I think y'all will enjoy it a lot! Izuku will have a blast □

cw: slight gore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa doesn't usually eat bagels, but since there aren't many other options for a late lunch around here, he figures he'll have to settle for one.

He holds the toasted bagel in his gloved hand and eyes the ham and cheese melting between the slices. He doesn't eat this sort of stuff often, mostly because he has a lot of allergies that are annoying to keep checking for, so really he should consider this a treat of some sort.

Even if it doesn't taste very good to him.

As Sansa walks through the bustling streets, he's acutely aware of the large holster sitting on his left thigh. Strapped securely inside it is his gun—one that's specially made for his body. Because he has more agility and a higher sense of awareness than most other officers (and also because he has sharp claws that may get caught in the trigger), he has to have weapons that are suited specifically to him.

This way, there are no accidents.

It's a good deterrent, too. No one walking near him can miss the gun since it's so big. No one usually does any crime in front of him because of this either.

All things considering, Sansa has it pretty well.

He finds that the people in this prefecture have no clue who he is—and why should they? He doesn't usually travel, and he's not a big name by any means. But the civilians (or more specifically, criminals) back in Shizuoka certainly know who Sansa is. In fact, they make a

point to avoid Sansa entirely whenever they're around him.

Why? Because Sansa has a sort of sixth sense for trouble. Call it a quirk, call it skill, or call it luck, whatever. Sansa is just good at his job.

So when the tip of his tail twitches out of the blue once, twice, Sansa knows he should pay attention. He throws the wrapper of his bagel in a nearby trash can and scans around. He predicts the crime just before it happens; about five yards in front of him on the sidewalk, a woman is walking by clutching a purse to her chest.

That doesn't stop the person beside her from slamming into her and yanking it away, though.

It's such a bold, pitiful crime that Sansa is almost sympathetic. The only criminals brave enough to snatch a bag in broad daylight are always either stupid or really, really desperate. Sometimes it's a combination of both.

Either way, Sansa can handle this just fine. Seeing as there are no heroes or on duty officers around to help, he has a responsibility to step in here. Being who he is, Sansa has no trouble catching up with the runaway thief.

He's quicker than most people, even those who have minor enhancements. This is partially due to his bone structure and partially due to his extensive training.

So, he nearly misses it when the woman spins around with a gasp and stretches out her hand, fingers twitching in the direction of where the thief is running. She yanks her hand back to her chest just as quickly, however, almost as if being burned.

Sansa shoots past her and catches up to the thief, who doesn't seem to be using a quirk of any kind—which makes this easier. Sansa has him on the floor in seconds, already wrapping him up in quirk suppressing capture wire. The man doesn't even have time to fully comprehend what the hell happened before he's completely subdued.

The purse is thrown off to the side, and Sansa grabs it before anyone else can get any bright ideas. In busy streets like this one, anything can happen.

Working off muscle memory by now, Sansa calls in the crime on his phone and waits for a nearby officer or hero to arrive. Hopefully

they'll get here soon, as he really doesn't want to waste his time on something as trivial as this for longer than necessary.

Every crime is weighed the same in his book, sure, but that doesn't mean he can't be impatient at times.

The woman is out of breath when she reaches the corner of the street where Sansa and the thief are. She slows down a few feet away and stares up at Sansa (yes, up—Sansa is moderately tall, though it doesn't help that this woman is also slightly below average height for women in Japan) with wide, bottle green eyes.

Sincerity and gratitude oozes from her expression and shoulders when she puts her hands together and thanks him. Her voice is watery yet somehow strong, as if she's trying hard to sound more confident than she even has the ability to be. Maybe once upon a time she *was* more confident.

He tips his head at her, gaze falling across her face. Her skin is shiny in the sunlight, and there's not a blemish on her apart from the dark bags under her eyes. She has long, dark green hair that's pulled into a half bun, and there's an itch there at the base of Sansa's neck. His hair prickles, and he straightens up dutifully.

She smells a little familiar. Perhaps Sansa has run into her before or has crossed paths with her a while back.

He nods sharply and assures her it's nothing, that he's just doing his job. She shakes her head and bows, not taking that as an acceptable answer. Right off the bat Sansa can tell she's one genuine person.

He's not given a chance to respond to that before a woman with an orange and black suit swoops in from above and introduces herself as a hero who's currently patrolling the area. Sansa excuses himself from the victim and swiftly verifies the ID of the hero. He allows her to take a picture of the handbag for evidence purposes before taking it to hand back to the victim, who is visibly relieved.

He's grateful someone could get here so quickly, as now he doesn't have to physically stay at the scene. He'll be forwarded the work and paperwork later on, which he prefers.

He leaves just as more officers arrive to more thoroughly check on the woman, and as he walks he lets out a big yawn, his sharp teeth glinting in the light. He figures he'll need to buy more groceries since he's moving into someplace new. It never hurts to stock up, and

besides, he has a feeling he won't have a lot of time to spare for shopping in the future.

After another couple hours spent surveying the area and scouting out the best stores, Sansa walks into his apartment building and counts all of the exits and windows, more to keep himself alert than anything else.

He takes the elevator up and notes the way the carpet beneath him is pristine and brand new. It must've been replaced fairly recently. This is a rather nice complex, after all. It's nothing special, but it's definitely not a slump.

Not that Sansa would complain either way. He's made a home out of much worse places.

He finds his apartment and digs for his department-issued keys, balancing his bags using his knee as he searches for the right one.

Just as he's putting the key into the door, the air around him shifts, and the boards beneath the carpet creak just slightly. Sansa is aware of their presence long before the newcomer has even spoken.

"Excuse me. I think they left your package on my step instead of—" The woman stops dead when Sansa turns to look at her. She's struggling to carry a large box even with both of her hands, and Sansa quickly spies the brand name printed onto the side of it and realizes why.

That's his new computer setup. It's surely heavy.

Sansa understands why she stopped when he takes another moment to look at her. It's the same woman from before, the one whose handbag was stolen. And, as if to confirm Sansa's memory, a familiar purse can be seen resting on her hip.

Her cheeks tinge pink. "Oh, gosh! Hello! I didn't know you lived here."

Sansa blinks at her and pushes open his door to set his groceries just inside. "I just moved in. Glad to see you're still alright, ma'am. And thanks for bringing this to me," he adds, taking the heavy box from her when he sees her start to sway.

She nods jerkily a few times. "Of course! And, er, thank *you*… again, I mean, for earlier."

Sansa waves her off for the second time, and that seems to be the end of the conversation. He can sense her awkwardness rising, and honestly he's not in the mood to socialize, not since he has some work to get done before tomorrow, so he's not going to drag things out. She doesn't mind, evidently, as she seems to deflate when Sansa bids her farewell and they both retreat back to their respective apartments. Maybe it would've been polite to at least get her name, as he's her new neighbor, after all, but Sansa has time to do that later.

For now, he only wonders where he's going to put this new computer.

It's certainly a small apartment, but it'll do nicely.

He's not planning on staying forever.

Izuku can't reach the counter. He stretches on his tiptoes, trying to grab the book he knows is sitting somewhere up there.

He likes reading books about All Might. Every night he reads over the same pages and traces over the letters, memorizing the pictures and numbers presented.

It's something of a comfort for him.

"Let's continue on with hypothesis testing. Can anyone refresh our memories and tell me the difference between a Type 1 and a Type 2 error?"

Izuku's tongue pokes out of his mouth as he concentrates, and his brows dip in frustration. He shouldn't be so small. Kacchan isn't small. Other kids his age aren't this small either. Why is Izuku? It feels a little unfair. Maybe he will grow later. Maybe then Kacchan will stop giving him that mean look once Izuku has grown up to be like him.

And doesn't that sound great? Growing up will be awesome. Izuku won't have to try so hard to be liked anymore. He won't have to struggle to reach his favorite hero.

He can finally be better than what he is.

"Correct, Yaoyorozu." Ectoplasm's voice is tinny, echoing around the

room in multiple directions. “Now, let’s identify the null in this problem. Anyone want to give it a try?”

Izuku balances his pen on his knuckles, flipping it around a few times just to feel the weight. His desk is a mess, and he doesn’t even have his math notes out, but he doesn’t care. He’s just so exhausted.

Every few minutes he’ll write a new idea for the Club’s new defense systems in his personal notebook, acting as if he’s paying attention, and will then daze for another stretch of time.

It’s like clockwork.

Izuku’s frustration boils over. He leans back on his heels, pouting. He bites his lip and thinks hard, knowing there’s only one way he can get to his book that’s simple and also self-sufficient.

After a moment’s hesitation, Izuku peels off his glove and sticks his hand over the counter, pointing his palm where he knows the book is. He visualizes it clearly in his mind and wills it to come towards him.

And it does with seemingly no effort.

“So, if we increase the significance level to eight percent, how would our answer change?”

Hands shoot up all around the room, but they also don’t. Izuku wouldn’t know; everything is fuzzy around him. He stares down at his lined paper, eyes unseeing.

“Someone new should speak, please,” Ectoplasm says, and half the hands go down.

Giddy, little Izuku brings the book to his chest and turns around, about to head back to his room to compare this book with another one he took from Kacchan’s house. The numbers regarding All Might’s heroic statistics always change, but there’s one thing in common—they’re always high.

But when he steps around the cabinets of the kitchen, he runs into his mother’s legs. She’s wearing a long, flowy skirt and a fluffy sweater today. Her hair, no longer in a bun or braid, falls down to her shoulders. It puts emphasis on the darkness under her eyes.

Izuku’s heart nearly stops, and he backs up, realizing with a start that his glove is still off.

He was so happy he forgot about it entirely.

“Midoriya. Why don’t you give us a thought?”

His lips part, and he’s about to defend himself—but from what? Why is he already scared? What did he do?

But his mother only smiles, and there are no sparks in her eyes like there were yesterday. She is nothing but quiet, comforting, and calm. She holds out a hand in invitation, and Izuku takes it with a wide, hopeful gaze.

Her hand is soft. He likes that. He likes how his hand always seems to fit perfectly with hers. Like two puzzle pieces, almost. Maybe Izuku does like puzzles.

Izuku drops his pen, and it rolls around his desk. It comes to a stop right near the edge, and the boy almost wants to push it over the rest of the way.

His hands burn, so he rubs them. The tingling sensation lessens to a dull prickling.

“Do you want me to read it to you, baby?” She asks in a whisper, like she has no voice left, and Izuku’s mind soars.

He’s too old, he knows, and he’s supposed to be growing up by now, but how could he ever deny his mother something like this? With a watery smile, Izuku nods vigorously and pushes the book against her so she can grab it, and in the same movement he pulls away from her to hop on the couch in preparation.

“Midoriya, would you like to ask a classmate for some help?”

Izuku closes his notebook and runs a finger along the cracked spine. This morning he accidentally looked in the mirror before his shower, and surprisingly he didn’t hate everything he saw. There were no patches of white hair, and the scars on his face didn’t actually bother him all so much.

He was thinking of other things. His mother has been on his mind lately and he doesn’t know why. He isn’t even really sure if it’s a good thing or a bad thing. Does he hate it? How can he tell? And why does he keep thinking of *before?*

Why does he keep thinking of the good man he once thought All for One was? Or maybe the good man he truly was, back before he knew

what Izuku could do.

Izuku has his father's eyes and his mother's mouth. On his face they're still together, he supposes. He is the only remaining proof of the love they shared. What does that make him?

He dozes with his head on his mother's warm, frilly shoulder. Her words drag him to sleep, and he wonders when she stops reading, if she ever stops at all.

Here, he dreams of All Might and heroes and his mother, and in the morning he vows once more to make his brave fantasies reality someday. He'll grow up and be strong enough to protect his mother. She won't be so tired anymore.

Izuku will make sure of it.

A light touch to Izuku's shoulder has the boy startling so hard that both the pen and notebook topple off the desk. Izuku is lucky he has enough sense in him to reel back One for All before he can overreact.

Ectoplasm stands beside his desk, his arm already retreating back to the insides of his cloak. Except Ectoplasm is still up at the front of the room, meaning he made a clone.

It's then that Izuku's brain processes what was happening while he was daydreaming, and his cheeks quickly burn scarlet. The entire class is staring at him now, and some are giggling behind their hands. Even Kacchan is looking back at him with a glare, telling Izuku that his friend tried at least to get him to pay attention but ultimately failed.

Well, shit.

Izuku sits up straight, and his entire body is red now. "Sorry! It's—I was—!"

His eyes find the board, and his mind races as he reads over the problem and sees the work that's already been done. What did he ask? What did Ectoplasm want Izuku to do?

He skips to the last line Ectoplasm wrote, and he sees the numbers in his mind, moving around without being asked. Distribution curves flash in front of him, and probability tables beg for his attention.

Ectoplasm tips his head. "I can come back to—"

Izuku shouts out the number he achieves, and immediately after he says it a weird silence falls over the class. His muscles tense in waiting, and he swears even the shadow men in the corner of his vision stop their drug dealing to look.

"Correct, thank you," Ectoplasm eventually says, and he gives a little nod before turning back to the board. "Moving on to the next topic…"

Izuku slumps in his chair in relief as the attention is diverted off him, but the moment is short lived, as Ectoplasm's clone drops a little note onto the desk before going back to disappear into the hero's body.

And Izuku slumps for a different reason this time. He doesn't even have to look at the note to see what it says.

He stays in his seat after the bell rings, stomach churning. He waves off his friends and tells them he'll catch up, assuring them that *yes,* he's fine, he was just distracted, and no, he's not getting behind on schoolwork or notes, but thanks.

When Kaminari and Sero pass him, they wink and give him a knowing look, which Izuku tries hard to ignore. He knows they don't mean anything bad by it, but it's just… difficult sometimes. Pushing away these *thoughts* of his nowadays.

They were laughing at you, comes the quiet whisper in Izuku's left ear. It's gentle and soothing, like how a mother coos to her child, but it makes Izuku's neck itch either way.

They weren't being mean, Izuku assures.

Weren't they? The question is received on his right side this time, and the boy shivers, breath suspended. *They're always laughing.*

It's not their fault. They don't understand.

You could make them understand.

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut, temples throbbing. He scratches at his neck and moves onto rubbing his ears. It feels like a bug has crawled into them and won't come out. *Stop it.*

Ectoplasm calls him up after wiping down the board, and Izuku trudges up to him silently, leaving the voice behind.

"Are you sick, Midoriya?" He asks first, and Izuku forces himself to

look him in the eye. It's only respectful.

"No, sensei."

Ectoplasm crosses his arms beneath the cloak—Izuku can see the movements. "I can't say I fully believe that, but I'll leave that judgment up to you. Midoriya, I know you still do all of your work, and you have turned in all of your past missing assignments, but I still need you to pay a little more attention in class. Believe me, I understand these topics are boring, especially since you've already learned them, and I know you have trouble focusing when you're not given more challenging assignments, but the point remains."

Izuku nods in understanding, swaying on his feet.

His teacher leans forward a little to get a better look at him. "Are you sleeping enough?" The question almost takes Izuku by surprise. He swallows and nods again. "Yes."

Ectoplasm doesn't look convinced, but he doesn't press. "Well, I don't want to tell Aizawa about this, but I will if it happens again. If you need help, we have the resources, understood?"

Izuku gives a quick bow, knowing a dismissal when he hears one. "Understood. Sorry, sir. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," he responds, though not unkindly. His voice is a soothing rumble.

Izuku practically scampers off, relieved at being let off so easily. If it were Aizawa who caught him dozing off in class, he'd probably be serving detention again or be doing a short response assignment about the lesson he missed.

Ectoplasm is much more forgiving.

The boy pauses outside the lunchroom and sighs, preparing himself for another lecture given by Iida about paying attention.

He's been getting a lot of these lately.

“This is so cramped,” Kacchan grumbles, tucking his head down as he crawls behind Izuku in the vents above the library.

Izuku shushes him. “Do you want people to hear you? Nezu said if he gets one more complaint about rodents in the ceiling he’s going to ban me from coming up here.”

Kacchan scoffs, and the sound echoes around the tunnel. “Doesn’t he use this shit, too? Maybe they’re complaining about him.”

“That’s what I said! I mean, out of the two of us, which one is the actual rodent?”

Izuku passes by a hatch and immediately halts, pressing his face against the slits so he can see where he’s at.

Kacchan makes an indignant noise behind him. “Quit stopping like that! Your ass is in my face!”

The boy rolls his eyes. “Don’t act like you don’t like it,” he says, going back to his searching.

Except he should’ve known the consequences of joking around like that, as then there’s a familiar crackling sound and a superpowered fist connecting with his right ass cheek.

Izuku yelps and flies forward, making the hatch give way beneath him. His face goes through first, starting the descent into the room, and he’s about to smash right into the wooden table beneath him when a calloused, warm hand grabs his ankle. For a good five seconds, Izuku dangles upside-down from the ceiling, his hair poofing up due to the situation.

Around thirty or so quirks hit his mind, and the boy shifts his face so he can see all the students staring back at him in shock from their seats. Huh. This must be the third years’ time to do their research for their finals.

Izuku is momentarily annoyed. Why do they look so surprised? They should be ready to expect the unexpected.

He’s about to make an offhand comment when his eyes catch on something in the left side of his vision. There at the table, held in the hands of some stoned student, is the book he was looking for. Kayama asked him to retrieve it for her, and she denied the online version he sent her. She wanted the physical copy, so here he is.

Izuku makes direct eye contact with the student and slowly reaches forward to take the book out of their hand, his blood rushing to his head.

The student opens their mouth to object, but Izuku presses a finger to their lips and just shakes his head, and they let it happen.

At that moment, Kacchan begins to tug him up, back into the depths of the vents, and Izuku is satisfied, as his mission has been completed even quicker than previously estimated.

Izuku flops onto the vent floor, still holding the book. “That hurt, y’know.”

Kacchan pants, trying to replace the hatch Izuku broke. “Yeah, it was meant to, fuckface. Good luck getting the old lady to heal that for ya.”

Izuku grimaces. It was a hell of a punch, so his ass still throbs. It’ll heal quickly enough, which is great, as there’s no way in hell he’s going to ask Recovery Girl, not that he thinks she’d waste her energy to heal such a stupid thing anyway.

Kacchan stays inside the vents while Izuku drops the book off on Kayama-sensei’s desk. He wanted to know why Izuku likes to stay in the vents a lot, so Izuku decided to show him.

He obviously likes the peace and quiet, or else he wouldn’t still be here with Izuku.

He doesn’t know exactly how it happens, but soon Izuku finds himself sitting on top of Kacchan, who is playing with his phone, and massaging his friend’s free hand.

Kacchan’s hands are large. They’re rough and always slightly moist from sweat. Izuku had some oil left in his vent stash, so he got some out and proceeded to rub out the kinks and treat the callouses he found.

Kacchan, feeling too relaxed to truly be upset or weirded out, doesn’t stop him.

Besides, Izuku isn’t doing this just to be nice. Recently, he’s been studying the effects of different medical creams on joint functionality for those with emitter type quirks. If he tries this specific type of oil on Kacchan and massages it all in, he can observe the effects in the field during training.

Then Izuku can use that data to maybe make a supporting gauntlet for himself and others with powerful quirks. It could be a self-lubricating gauntlet, but first Izuku has to make sure it won't screw up Kacchan's sweat.

"Other hand," Izuku orders albeit quietly, done with Kacchan's left side. The blond doesn't hear him at first, likely due to the fact Izuku is speaking too low for his ears, but when the demand is repeated a little louder, he complies without argument, still engrossed with his screen.

Izuku lets his mind wander. Nezu was nicer than usual this morning and even lightened Izuku's restriction. He allowed him to go into the laboratory today and start on a few of his new projects—even though Izuku was supposed to be grounded for another week because of his last stunt.

While it's suspicious, Izuku isn't going to worry about why Nezu decided to go back on his word. All he cares about is the fact that he could finally finish a very rough version of a new AI for Rabbit. It's simple, and it's not like AINA to any degree, but it does have all the basic functions she did, so it's good for safety.

He already installed it into the mask and hood, so the next time he goes out he can try it.

Izuku pauses in his work and lets his eyes wander up to Kacchan's face. The light from his screen illuminates him, and Izuku stares selfishly for a moment more.

Why does intertwining his fingers with Kacchan feel like coming home to a place Izuku nearly lost?

Izuku was six years old with the sun beaming on his face. He had dirt beneath his fingernails and didn't know of the short life ahead of him. His best friend stood beside him, palms held up as he showcased his quirk once more with a triumphant gleam to his eye. Izuku beamed with him, and a tooth was missing. His mouth was sticky from the lemonade he helped Auntie make.

His knees were covered in the mulch from the playground. Izuku remembers how they dug into his skin.

Kacchan's parents gazed at them wistfully, and both the boys wondered why they seemed so sad.

The sky was clear and beautiful then, but back home there was a

storm.

Izuku's pretending dug him further into empty grave after empty grave, but all was well, because he was there, away from the others, and he could have almost forgotten about what awaited him at the facility.

How could Izuku have ever grown out of that place?

Kacchan is gone by the time Aizawa uses his capture weapon to open up the vent hatch nearest to Izuku.

Izuku is not surprised, as he felt him coming.

"I called you and you didn't answer," Aizawa remarks.

Izuku picks at a nail, not bothering to move closer to the opening so Aizawa can hear him better. "I don't have my phone on me," he answers, similarly to how a liar would.

"Well, Mic and I are needed for an assignment tonight. It's urgent."

This makes Izuku frown. "Can I come?"

"You're funny." Aizawa's clothes rustle, like he's crossing his arms or scratching at something. "We have to leave right now since it's on the other side of Japan. All Might can either take you back home or you can stay over with him, it's up to you, I don't care. But since we won't be home, no patrolling, got it?"

Izuku immediately sullens. *Of course that's what he cares about.* "Whatever," he says, not hiding his annoyance.

"Try again."

"Yes, I got it."

"Good. We'll be back early in the morning, so don't wait for us."

Izuku's curiosity wins over. "What kinda mission is it?"

"That's for us to know and you to not. See you."

Izuku scoffs loud enough for Aizawa to hear him, but then he actually feels Aizawa's quirk signature walking away and panics. He scrambles out of the vents and nearly faceplants into the ground when he drops to the floor. "Wait!"

Aizawa turns, and his face is tucked into his scarf with his hands in his pockets. “What?”

“Uh. Just…” Izuku bites his lip and looks away, rubbing his arm. He’s not sure why he’s feeling scared all of a sudden, but he can’t help the fear and anxiety that curl into his gut. “There’s a lot of Nomu reports, so, uh… Be safe?”

Aizawa nods and rolls his eyes, though not unkindly. “Sure, kid.”

As Izuku watches his retreating back, his worry only triples. If the Commission is desperate enough to call for both Present Mic and Eraserhead to a mission so far away, it must be serious. Probably an infiltration type thing.

Which means it’s even more dangerous.

But Izuku forces himself to think less of that sort of thing. Aizawa and Yamada are very capable, so they’ll be fine. There’s no use in worrying, especially since he’ll be far away. There’s not much he can do even if something does happen.

Just like how he used to, Izuku puts in some earbuds and blasts music to keep his fears at bay. Distractions can help, he figures. He can’t afford to be clingy.

It’s always been a nasty habit of his to care too much and hold on too little.

Izuku thinks he’s finally gotten a good hold on the whole ‘exist in the real world whilst also simultaneously living inside my quirk’ thing. After quite some effort and occasional belittling from Fifth, Izuku is capable of moving around in One for All while being awake.

And it’s not much, but he can even move around in *both* planes at the same time—just a few steps at a time, of course, but still.

It takes a lot of energy, and Izuku has to focus really hard, but it works. What’s the point of doing this? Not even Izuku is sure yet, but it must come in handy eventually, he’s sure.

And so, when he finally manages to get his hands on his vestige counterpart by surprise attacking him at a time when he'd least expect Izuku to be there, the first thing he does is attempt to drown him.

Izuku, with his teeth gritted, holds Not-Izuku beneath murky water, feeling One for All crackle all around his body to support him.

The generational quirk is activated in real life too; it's smoothly gliding over Izuku's skin like an electric blanket, making a soft zipping sound as it goes. It's difficult to have both visions in mind at once, but Izuku manages. He has to flip between the two sights every few seconds, which is pretty unconventional in all honesty.

A problem is made apparent just seconds later: Izuku is much more sluggish and weak while attempting to manage both of his bodies at once. Not-Izuku twists in the depths and grabs him by the throat, switching their positions with one heave.

The feeling of the water forcefully going up his nose and down his throat, suffocating him, makes Izuku panic and break off his connection.

He stands there in real life, gasping for breath, and convinces himself that the wetness on his forehead is sweat and not water.

Well. That went a lot better than the last time he did it. Izuku considers this progress.

"My boy, calm yourself," Yagi says in a hushed whisper, coming up beside him. His large hands come up to swipe at the red lightning sparking around Izuku's form.

This reminds Izuku that he is indeed in the middle of a grocery store aisle carrying bags of food for their dinner tonight.

"Oh, right," he says, shivering as One for All recedes back into him. "I forgot where I was for a second."

Yagi's gaze shines with worry. "You forgot? Wait." He leans closer, scandalized. "Was it the voices again?"

"Uh, no?"

Yagi holds onto Izuku's hoodie and looks around the aisle, eyes narrowing. "Did you see any of them?"

Izuku huffs and shrugs him off, cheeks burning as he begins to walk away. “Not exactly.”

The blond rushes after him, still talking quietly. “You know, you can tell me these things when they happen, young man. You don’t need to keep it to yourself.”

“I’m fine, sir. Really. It’s not about that at all.”

“I am being genuine here, Midoriya. Please don’t dismiss—”

“Yagi,” Izuku interrupts, skin itching. “I said I’m *fine.”*

All Might’s mouth snaps shut, and while he doesn’t outwardly show any annoyance or indignance, Izuku can sense his unhappiness in the air. Plus, the way his expression darkens just a fraction doesn’t denote anything good for Izuku.

So Izuku, knowing he has no right to be short with his teacher, turns back around and rubs his arm nervously. “Sorry. It’s just, uh, complicated. But I really am okay. Can I…” He frowns, searching for the right words. What is it he’s supposed to tell the adults around him when he can’t handle something at that moment? “Can I tell you about it later?”

Yagi must appreciate this response more, as he deflates and nods. “Of course, my boy. Now, onto other things.” He gives Izuku a sidelong glance as they continue on with their shopping. “Midterms are coming up soon, yes? I was thinking we could have a little training exercise sometime this week, just you and I. We could gauge how things are going with your quirk, and I can see what skills you’ll need to work on before the tests.”

Izuku eyes a clearance tag on the opposite side of the store and makes his way over to it. “I take it you can’t tell me what the practical exam is going to be?”

“Well, no, as that’d be cheating.”

“Is it at least gonna be exciting?”

Yagi ignores the comment. “I don’t believe you’ll need to cheat in order to succeed. I have faith you’ll do well.”

“That’s ominous.”

“It’s not ominous.”

Izuku thinks about this. “You’re kinda ominous sometimes, though.”

“What? How am I ominous?”

Izuku continues gliding through the store. He needs a bed for Missy for whenever she gets to sleepover with him at Yagi’s penthouse.

To say that Izuku is distracted right now would be an understatement. He can barely concentrate on his mundane task or even respond to his mentor’s prodding questions due to the way he’s currently not even aware of his surroundings. He just has so much on his plate—and no one to really explain it all to—that now he feels extremely tired. In fact, that’s been his default mood nowadays.

His new position at the Club has brought with it more stress and responsibilities, unsurprisingly. But something that Izuku did not think to expect was how all of the members would react to the new change of command.

He was so used to the members at his specific location that he forgot how the others feel about his mere existence as a Club representative. Izuku’s contacts have been sending him the reactions from the other location champions, and it’s altogether too clear they don’t approve of him. They don’t think he has enough experience, and some even outright stated that he’s not old enough to even be considered for the role.

Only one person made the claim that he’s not strong enough. Izuku isn’t sure what to make of that.

You got rid of their murderer for them, that same voice from before reminds him, *and yet you’ve not earned their respect. Don’t they see what you are?*

He was my fault to begin with. They have every right to be hesitant.

The next words come out scathing, but somehow they’re not angry—rather, they sound almost encouraging. *You’re cursed with foolish thinking. You have the power to make them quiet, but you choose to let them chatter.*

Because they’re right, Izuku responds evenly, shutting out the voice as best he can. It’s hard to do, but he manages. It’s been getting worse and worse as the days go on. He needs to get a better hold of himself.

Another thing that Izuku failed to account for, though, is that he also has to sign off on a lot of decisions regarding the locations and movements of the Clubs in this district now. He's in charge of *all* of that, so he must be informed of every operation, state his opinion and make changes if necessary, and then give his approval.

It's fucking mind-numbing.

The good thing, though, is that now Izuku is being spoon fed more information than ever before.

Izuku can't say he's used to being treated like such an important person, however. While being a Champion earned him some respect, the others didn't feel obligated to address him as someone higher up than them. They were all still equals then.

Now, Izuku is being treated like… like an *adult,* even by the people who don't agree with his new authority.

And it's weird, as he's wanted nothing but that for a big part of his life, but now that he has it he's unsure of himself.

He's been writing in his special notebook more often lately because of this. This is a big change, so he needs to document everything where all of the important stuff is. He wishes he had it on him now, but he accidentally left it in the vents at school. It'll be fine, though, as he put it in a little makeshift alcove where no one else can find it.

All Might and Izuku are getting groceries to make a nice dinner for tonight, as the number one hero stated that it's necessary to eat at least one well-prepared and expensive meal every week. When Izuku asked why he thinks that, Yagi only replied that that's what his master told him is the secret key to fully understanding and gaining control over One for All.

Izuku figures that's probably why he was so shitty at controlling the quirk at the beginning. He just wasn't rich enough.

"Did you hear about the horse infestation in the United States?" Yagi asks while they're in line to check out. His voice is frivolous, which is suspicious, and he's also speaking in English—also suspicious—but Izuku pays it no mind.

"Infestation? That's a weird way to describe it," Izuku replies absentmindedly.

“They were actually villains in disguise, my boy! A bunch of heroes had to go fight them! I saw a video of it myself.” All Might leans in close, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. *“Do you know what one of the horses said when it fell?”*

Izuku is too tired to even question the logic of that statement, so he just shakes his head to prompt his teacher for an answer.

“‘Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t giddyup!’”

After placing the yellow separator at the end of the conveyor belt, Izuku just stares at Yagi, perplexed. The cashier at the register gives a little chuckle, but it sounds more pitying than anything.

“That was a good one,” Izuku deadpans, now standing by the screen to make sure all of the coupons and sales went through.

All Might huffs and pushes away Izuku’s (Nezu’s) credit card without acknowledging that Izuku even attempted to pay, pulling out his matte black debit card instead. “I obviously need to up my game if that wasn’t funny enough.”

“It was great,” Izuku tries to reassure, but even he knows how flat that comes out.

The number one hero isn’t convinced, though, and he spends the rest of their shopping adventure grumbling about how he should go back to the U.S. to learn some more jokes, as apparently the people over there make the best ones.

They’re halfway to the car and each carrying a multitude of bags when Izuku hears it: the whistle of death.

A freight train blares in his ears, and that’s plenty of warning for him to *move.* Izuku senses the rush of wind and immediately jumps in front of All Might, dropping the food to the concrete below and activating One for All just in time to yank the large piece of shrapnel that’s shooting towards them out of the air. Izuku blinks when he comes eye-to-eye with the pointed, jagged end of it.

At the exact same time, steam billows out from behind him, and Izuku feels his mentor’s quirk thrum to life when he inflates. As the fog clears, he can see that All Might did the exact same thing he did. Yagi is holding what looks to be a six hundred pound chunk of sharp metal in the spot that Izuku resided in just half a second before.

If All Might didn't catch it, the boy probably would've been sliced in half.

They share quick, wide-eyed glances with each other upon realizing exactly what happened, and Izuku thanks the lucky stars that they're halfway inside the mouth of an alley right now. All Might inflated in broad daylight, so anyone could've seen if he were out on the street. There are no cameras around this block, though, Izuku knows.

Did All Might know this as well, or did he not even think about the repercussions of changing forms here?

An explosion in the distance rocks the earth, and screams sound further up the block. Izuku's eyes light up when he sees smoke and flames coming from a building a mile or two away, and for a second he thinks he's hallucinating when he sees a fucking *dinosaur* clawing up the side of it.

Rahonavis, Izuku's brain supplies, dredging up memories from Kacchan's long ago dinosaur phase. *From the late Cretaceous period.*

The feathers on the animal aren't burning up when it gets close to the raging fire. Izuku wants to study it for a minute more, but then he sees more dinosaurs and mutated species running up along the streets, all varying in size and species. He can feel thousands of quirks scrambling around, trying to escape, so he focuses on priority number one: protect the civilians.

His hand instinctively reaches to unzip his jacket and pull out the latest version of his portable suit. "All M—"

"Stay put," All Might orders, back to being no-nonsense. He crouches low, preparing to take off, and Izuku blanches.

Are you kidding? Izuku wants to ask. *Do you not see how many there are?*

Just from where Izuku is, he can count over a hundred creatures. He's sure most of them are easy to kill, as Extract is informing him they're not made from any quirks, but they'll probably still pose a threat!

Besides, there doesn't seem to be any other pro heroes readily nearby. All Might can't use too much of his power at once for fear of hurting the civilians or damaging buildings. His time limit is already running short today since he did an hour of battle training with the class!

“All Might, I have my costume,” he hisses, hoping he sounds more assertive than he feels. “Let me at least protect the people!”

The hero turns on him. “This isn’t the time to argue! Do as I—”

“It'll be a few minutes before anyone arrives to help! You can take care of whoever is causing this, and I’ll help with evacuation. *Please,* sensei!”

Izuku’s pleading tone makes All Might pause. The man’s face is hard, and he looks like he’s about to rebuke Izuku once more, but then another explosion goes off, this one a little closer, and Yagi throws a quick glance at the sky, almost as if waiting for an answer to appear to him. The clock is ticking, and even he must be aware of that.

After what feels like a lifetime but what is surely only a few seconds, All Might breathes in sharply. “Fine, but you will only protect civilians, and after you’re done you’ll evacuate yourself. Do *not* run into a battle you cannot win, young man. Is that understood? Protect the civilians *only.”*

Izuku nods frantically, excited at being given permission to do what he does best. He yanks out the gauntlet resting inside his jacket pocket and presses it against his chest, relishing in the feeling of his prototype Rabbit costume beginning to form around him. It’s not perfect, but the sleek fabric looks amazing in the light and shimmers with the faintest green. Dark red accents go up the sides and disappear around his shoulders, forming what looks to be two bunny ears.

He’s about to rush off in the direction of screaming when a large hand grabs his forearm, wrenching him back.

He gasps, hand coming up to wrap around All Might’s wrist. When he looks up, the man’s face is set, and his blue eyes are intense. “I said, *is that understood?”*

Izuku is momentarily at a loss for words. He isn’t used to hearing All Might sound like that. In fact, he can’t recall the last time he heard Yagi speak in that tone. He blinks a few times, shocked, but when All Might squeezes his forearm again, almost to the point of pain, Izuku responds immediately. “Yes, sir!”

“Good!” He’s released, and then All Might is leaving in a flurry of wind. “Be smart!”

With this order in mind, Izuku goes directly to where the civilians

need him. His new AI lights up when he slides on his mask and clicks it into place, and he's quick to tell it to highlight all the wobbling structures around him. The hologram projects out in front of him a little ways, and it's mostly eye level, which is just perfect. Since he doesn't have glasses or a forearm screen of any kind, this will have to do.

He focuses on groups of people in order to make things easier for himself, as there are easily over a thousand people just in this stretch of the city. In order to not become overwhelmed and have Extract spiral out of control, Izuku has to do things in sections.

And this part is familiar to him. He's experienced in evacuations for natural disasters and situations like this. The only difference is that he's not exactly used to being responsible for *this* many people alone, but he feels confident that he can rely on All Might to do the heavy lifting regarding villain control—at least until more heroes arrive.

He remains cognizant of any potential debris and explosions, and he herds people to safety by directing them to where the dinosaurs aren't. It seems everyone knows what's going on by now, too, which makes this even easier. People are running out of their apartments and leaving corporate buildings to escape, leaving Izuku with only the ones who need a little more help in leaving. He uses balconies to enter apartments and carry families out, making sure no animals are left behind either.

It all goes by in a whirlwind, as there's not a second to waste. He barely has time to speak to any of the civilians or issue any warnings aside from *go that way* and *keep moving!*

As time goes on, police and lower level heroes arrive on scene to help contain the dinosaurs which are quickly making their way through the city. Izuku's skin itches to help fight alongside them, but he remains on task with some difficulty. At one point, All Might flies across the road after having been presumably thrown by a bigger one. And Izuku can visibly see the smoke the hero exhales.

He's holding up of course (there was never any doubt from Izuku that he couldn't) but it's obvious this is taking a toll on him. The dinosaurs Izuku can see have a shock-absorption factor due to their thick skins, and they seem to be regenerating fairly quickly. So while Izuku can't sense any quirks in them, which crosses out the idea of his father being a part of this, it's clear they've been modified greatly from their original Cretaceous counterparts.

Is this the result of some kind of creation or puppetry quirk? Or is Izuku literally starring in a Jurassic Park movie?

Izuku's previous dinosaur count was around a hundred, but now his AI is telling him it's over five hundred and rapidly growing. They're coming from somewhere, Izuku is sure, but right now he doesn't have the time to look for the cause. That's All Might's job.

The pro heroes on scene are overwhelmed fast, as there seems to be more dinosaurs coming but no backup to match the influx.

And despite the situation and threat, Izuku feels giddy. He can pick off the dinosaurs closest to him as he continues herding the civilians away. He pulls out his pocket bōstaff and extends it completely, already jumping up and using a nearby fire escape to swing up onto a roof.

Except his feet haven't even touched the gravel yet when a body slams into him with a clipped screech. Izuku nearly topples right off the edge of the building, but he manages to wedge the sharp end of his bōstaff into the cracked concrete to keep his grip. He kicks himself up and lands on the back of the dinosaur that managed to somehow make its way up here.

And when Izuku sees the sheer size of it, his heart skips a beat.

Tarbosaurus. Late Cretaceous.

Izuku is starting to see a pattern here.

A large, wild head rears back, revealing sharp teeth, and Izuku makes quick work of sending the blade of his staff right through the neck. The skin was tough, but using One for All at twenty percent was enough to get the katana through. Izuku presses the button on the side of the hilt and grits his teeth as hot electricity flows through it, burning the dinosaur's skin and feathers enough so that it can't regenerate as quickly.

Regardless, Izuku is bucked off, and the boy lands lightly on his feet off to the side. He watches as the head slides to the floor and spews clear fluid across the rocks. He steps closer once the rest of the body has fallen, not smelling anything copper-like. This is obviously synthetic blood, but not for a machine. These are indeed organic creatures, sure, but Izuku is more certain now that the dinosaurs are a result of a quirk.

“Record,” he commands his AI, and the confirmation of the video being started is all Izuku needs before continuing on.

He’s going to review the footage later to study.

Izuku limits himself to only intercepting the dinosaurs that are going after civilians. He kicks the head of a smaller one clean off while carrying a family of five out of their tall apartment. Shelters on wheels are being stationed at various points in the city for people to run to, and Izuku fills them up like a kid getting candy in his pillowcase on Halloween.

Police squads seem to have already barricaded a large perimeter and are keeping the stray dinosaurs back rather successfully alongside the heroes. After depositing a little girl and her small dog, Izuku turns and darts back into the throng. There are hundreds of civilians left to get and not nearly enough time, in all honesty. Izuku feels the quirk signatures of more pro heroes making their way inside the perimeter to help as well, which makes him feel a little better at least.

A low, ribbed roar echoes through the smoking streets a bit down the road, and Izuku whips around in alarm, his stomach dropping to his ass once he sees a mutated Spinosaurus being thrown against a ten story building by a struggling hero.

A building that still has a few people inside, Izuku senses. Oh, *fuck.*

The building cracks, then crumbles, and the top story is the first one to go. It falls in on itself, and Izuku cusses aloud as he shoots himself over to the scene with the aid of One for All. Extract extends out immediately, pinpointing the exact locations of the civilians so Izuku can get them out efficiently. He flies through a window in the fifth story and rolls once he hits the ground. The entire building is quaking, and Izuku knows he has less than ten seconds.

One on this floor, two above, another below, one on ground level and running, not going to make it out in time, hurry, hurry—

Izuku is a blur of red as he slams himself up through the floor to grab the next few people, and he yells at them to hold onto him tightly before he dives back below, debris biting at his feet.

It’s dark and dusty, so Izuku is relying purely on his quirks and AI to direct him out.

Izuku launches himself forward once on the ground level and yanks

the last man to his chest just as the entire building collapses. He's shooting out of the dust cloud like a dirty bullet, eyes squeezed shut to protect himself from the rocks.

He stumbles to a halt a quarter of a mile away, chest heaving. The civilians slide off of him, and Izuku blinks the dirt from his eyes so he can do a quick check of their health. He doesn't have time now to take them directly to the shelters, and they look to be okay to get there on their own, so—

"Watch it!" A panicked shout from above pierces Izuku's ears, and the boy instinctively sends the civilians flying back with an air shot.

He doesn't have enough time to turn before the Spinosaurus from before is on him, all hot breath and bloody claws.

Teeth dig into his shoulder and yank him up, and Izuku has to bite his tongue *hard* to keep from screaming when he feels just how deep the bite is. He swears he can feel the teeth scraping against each other right through his goddamn *bones.*

He stabs at its face with his bōstaff once, twice, three times in quick succession, but the blade doesn't manage to pierce through the skin. He aims for the eyes then, but he's a second too late, as then he's being whipped around like a dog's chew toy. His bōstaff flies somewhere out of his reach, and he calls Pull to his mind immediately to retrieve it, only to be slammed against a wall so hard he loses his vision momentarily.

He dodges out of the way just as the Spinosaurus runs right through the building and nearly causes another collapse.

Izuku searches for his staff now that he has an opening and casts an angry glance back at the two civilians who are unmoved from their spots. "Run!" He snaps, hoping his voice is enough to get them going.

He learns quickly that he can't punch through this dinosaur either, as even when he does aim for the softer underbelly, the flesh beneath the skin of it is like putty, and his arm just gets sucked right in. It reminds him disgustingly of the sludge villain.

Izuku yanks himself out and jumps on top of it, narrowly avoiding a fatal swipe to the stomach.

"The fin is the thinnest part!" The hero who originally was fighting the Spinosaurus shouts, joining Izuku with balls of light erupting from

his hands. “Just distract it for me and I can get to the heart through the top!”

Izuku obeys and makes a home at the neck of the wild creature. He catches the thick wire the hero throws at him and quickly unravels it to wrap around its throat. He tightens his grip on the wire and pulls it up like reins, attempting to steer the dinosaur as it begins to run. He is the wire to the left to avoid snapping jaws and jabs the blade of his staff into the exposed right eye. The dinosaur lets out an ear piercing screech, and Izuku winces but holds on tight.

Except he should’ve known the sound would attract more creatures. Less than a second later, the window to his right bursts, and a smaller dinosaur is tackling him right off the back of the Spinosaurus.

Izuku skids across the road and gasps, fighting back against the new sets of claws digging into him.

He’s on his back now, eyes wide with panic. *Deinonychus. Late Cretaceous.*

Izuku blasts it off and scrambles to his feet, not hesitating to use twenty percent of One for All to send his boot right through the stomach of the stunned creature.

Unlike most other dinosaurs from this period, the deinonychus is a pack hunter, right? Izuku swears that’s what he remembers. If that’s the case, where’s the pack?

His answer is given right after this thought, as he’s quickly bombarded with a group of six more of them coming from the alleys nearby. Izuku pulls two of them towards him and smashes their heads together, throwing their bodies at the rest once he finishes them off.

He’s about to go for another one when the air behind him shifts. He leaps up, about to deliver a punch to whatever creature has decided to join this time—only for sharp talons to extend out from a winged body and sink into his back.

With one ferocious wing beat, Izuku is being taken to the heavens. And it’s weak, it’s piteous, it’s downright embarrassing, but for just a fraction of a moment, for a little sliver of time, Izuku is frozen with shock, and it’s not because of the blinding pain.

Because Izuku is soaring away from the ground at a speed that’s dizzying, with his arms limp by his sides and blood spraying out due

to the force of the wind, and he feels like he's already lived through this before.

His throat tightens, and air refuses to reach his lungs. It seems that fate has forgotten its promise. Izuku is not meant to die here, and yet the boy, despite all rational thought, believes wholeheartedly that this may be it, as he cannot breathe, he cannot think, and the air is only turning colder.

This dinosaur is not the Nomu, but that somehow makes Izuku feel even more wretched.

It is only by the grace of something far stronger than fate that another winged dinosaur crashes directly into the one carrying Izuku, most assuredly by accident. Izuku is sent flying into the side of a skyscraper like a meteorite.

He stays in the rubble for an unknown period of time, his cheek pressed against sharp glass as he simply gazes out the hole he entered through.

Pain rockets through his entire body every time he so much as moves an inch, and to be quite honest he feels very content in laying here and watching as the sun continues its descent. It's golden hour now, which is just perfect.

Izuku grimaces, however. He is missing the new episode of Keeping Up with the Kardashians.

A loud, metallic groaning brings Izuku away from his selfish thoughts. The wind outside picks up, and something innate tells Izuku to fucking *move,* so he does.

Ignoring the stabs in his chest, back, and shoulder, Izuku takes a better look out of the building and wants to sigh really hard when the situation is made apparent. A large, yellow crane is teetering off its axis, threatening to fall over. It's one of those tower cranes meant to build skyscrapers like the one Izuku is in right now, which means it's a few hundred feet tall and easily weighs around twenty tons, or 40,000 pounds.

That, coupled with gravity, makes a lot of force that Izuku can't fucking handle, that's for sure. But that doesn't mean he doesn't try.

Izuku is propelling himself to the top floor before the last wires holding the crane in place have even snapped, but he's still too late.

The crane tips over, beginning its catastrophic fall, and Izuku can't imagine a worse possible scenario than this.

There are still people below. He can feel their quirks. He can feel the *heroes* running about. Even besides that, this crane will cause billions in property damage and ruin the lives of so many people if it falls.

In a moment of panic, Izuku considers calling for All Might, but the man is halfway across the city and dealing with what Izuku can only describe as a Godzilla in the making. Which means this crane? It's Izuku's responsibility.

And he can't let it touch the ground.

Izuku juts out a hand to use Pull on the iron bar behind him on the roof and then readies his other hand to attempt to slow the crane down. He won't be able to stop it altogether, but if he can just slow the descent, the damage won't be as severe. But not even Pull is strong enough to slow it down. Izuku's shoulder yanks out of socket the moment he connects the crane to his palm using Pull. It's only due to the iron bar that Izuku doesn't fly right off the edge. He slides forward, closer and closer to it, however, and his grip falters on the bar rather quickly. *Come on! Come on!*

The crane is barely slowing down, but he can't stop. He has no other choice! He won't let it touch the ground like this! He digs his heels in with a guttural sound making its way out of his chest, and One for All lights up his calves, but that's not enough either. Finally, he's yanked forward, and then he's falling after the crane with the wind whipping at his face.

And there's only one thought that goes through his mind before it happens: he can't fail.

He has to get a hold of it no matter what.

His next movements are barely his own. Both of his palms point down, towards the whistling yellow crane.

And it's then that Izuku's rib cage cracks open, tearing his flesh apart and exposing his organs to the air. The weird thing, though, is that it actually doesn't. But it *feels* like it. Izuku feels the rush of white hot pain as his spine snaps back like a bow and his body convulses. His skin is caked with blood and another fluid he can't identify yet—all he knows is that he's strangely wet now.

But just as quickly as it appeared, the scorching heat is gone.

And all Izuku feels is cold.

Chapter End Notes

y’all know I love it when all might and vig izuku team up. they’re so op together. but on another note, i made myself sad by realizing that once izuku dies, he’s not going to have the one for all realm to go back to if he’s indeed the last user. he won’t be with nana or yoichi or all might bc one for all will die with him. they’ll all poof out of existence, and the only remnants of them will live in false memories. izuku won’t get to stay with the users like the others could. it’s sort of fitting for his character, tho. even in death he’s always been destined to be shouldering the burdens alone. i only wish for missy to accompany him when the time comes. having aina too might be too generous to ask for

also also a lot has happened with me lately? that’s why this one took a while. i had to put down one of my dogs a bit ago and my other two aren’t doing so hot either. ive had a lot of shit going on with school and aice tests and work, so ive just been floating along. but I did win a writing scholarship so there’s that ig. it was my birthday on the 23rd (i am now 18??) and I graduated from hs on the 25th. also ALSO the third year anniversary of this fic recently passed so thank y’all sm for sticking with me for this long. you guys just don’t know how much yall have saved me. but ugh this month has just been crazy. anyway I hope y’all r doing ok :(remember to take it slow. stay goated and don’t forget to show everyone you love them, including urself 🐰

I was thinking of this song on yt while writing the fight scene

e

believed a viper

Chapter Notes

cw: animal abuse and death (skip the larger italicized paragraphs in the first pov chunk to miss it)

have a longer chap as payment for being late once more

See the end of the chapter for more notes

People never ask much of Nezu.

He is one of the most intelligent beings alive, and while he isn't in a very high place of authority as a principal of a hero school, one of thousands out there, he still has contacts all over the globe. He is comforted by the fact that should he ever need a favor or deal, there are hundreds of people in his debt who will come to him without hesitation.

Once he asks, they'd have no other choice, really.

Nezu is known far and wide, but mostly for unsavory reasons. He is recognizable, sure, and people are usually able to call him out by name, but half the time he is not revered or met with awe.

Rather, he is met with disgust, disbelief, and jealousy.

He has no fans. The people who see him in the city don't come up to him excitedly for pictures or autographs. They don't squeal in amazement like they do for other pro heroes. Only the babies do. Only the children.

And Nezu loves children, but not in the fond *oh, they're so cute* way. Instead, it's more in the ferocious *I need to protect them* way.

Nezu needs to try his very hardest to cultivate the world they're in so that the future is a safer one for every being out there, human or not. Nezu hears the toddlers gasp and point at him when he's walking in a store, and he also hears the way their parents shush them and drag them along, towards the other end of the aisle.

Even in a population full of mutants of all sorts, he is still considered

an anomaly. He is considered *wrong*.

A freak show. A pet.

Nezu is called many things: rat, bear, stoat, sable, badger, mink, *mutt* — the list is never ending.

But he pays those terms no mind.

Why should he have fans? He is a pro hero, but that doesn't mean he's going to be famous. He's not in the top rankings, and he doesn't exactly have his own branded agency, so why would anyone actually look *up* to him?

To the world, Nezu will always be some lucky bastard mammal that managed to get a quirk. They say it like it's a blessing, like Nezu tried out for it, like he *asked* for it.

The Principal gives his all anyway. He doesn't judge. He doesn't hold grudges against those who think this way. He merely learns, teaches, and thinks.

He yearns for knowledge. He lives for trial and error. That's what his purpose is. At least, that's what he's good at, so it's best he sticks with it, right?

He stands in the middle of a living room in one of his secured apartments in the middle of nowhere. It's dark, as his blackout windows and curtains block every inch of light coming through. With a wave of his paw, his room comes to life in sparks of blue and red and green.

His holograms greet him with their corresponding AI databases, and they're everywhere he turns.

Books line the walls with notes sticking out of the pages at random. His creations whirl around the couches and maneuver through the apartment, completing their designated roles.

Similar to his frenzied works, Nezu paces. His eyes are narrowed, and he keeps his tail swishing until he can barely take the sensation of the fur dragging against the carpet any longer.

It's one of those nights. They're more and more frequent for reasons Nezu hasn't quantified entirely yet.

“I want its brain.”

The words come from outside the scratched glass. They’re hard to understand. He wishes he was allowed out again.

“Sir, we can’t possibly extract it and keep him alive—”

“Don’t care. I want it ready by morning.”

Morning? Morning. He sleeps, and when he wakes, that’s morning, isn’t it? He thinks so. That’s how it works sometimes. But is morning safe anymore? After hearing that?

“You… you want us to…”

There’s a breathy hiss. It hurts his ears.

“Prep it for surgery, dammit. Or kill it first, whatever. Just don’t bruise the brain.” A pause, and then, “It’s a dumb fucking rodent for God’s sake, why are you hesitating? It’s just that mind we need. Oh, and that blood, too. I need to see just what made that quirk injection work.”

“We’ve only established that it has positive effects on smaller mammals. We can’t be certain the quirk injections will work for other species, much less humans. Shouldn’t we wait until we see all the side effects before pushing forward with the release of—”

The flash of light following the explosive bang has his fur prickling. He stares from within his cage, unblinking, unmoving, and silent, as the red sprays against the glass.

His handler doesn’t speak to him again.

The sun is going down. Nezu doesn’t see it, but he knows it is. It’s about that time.

His watch beeps incessantly, and bulbs of light flash at various points of the room. Nezu watches, his beady eyes going back and forth between the alerts.

“Sir, I must suggest you lie down. Your blood pressure is outside the normal level—”

“Give me a copy of the file our dear friend Mr. Shield made ten minutes ago.”

“Of course.” The AI pauses. “ *I maintain that you should seek medical—”*

Nezu tips his head. “Is the copy downloaded?”

“Estimated time until completion is seven minutes.”

His tail lashes in faint annoyance. “Mute until it’s done.”

“I don’t believe that’s in your best—”

Nezu turns away and swipes the air to get his holographic keyboard to come up. He quickly wipes the AI of all of its personality functions and installs a new pre-made set within it, hoping this time it won’t turn out to be another failure.

For the majority of his life, Nezu has been ridiculed and questioned and mocked. He has no need for an AI that will do the same to him.

In all his years, perfecting a compassionate, sentient, yet obedient artificial companion has been nothing short of impossible. It’s something that has consumed his waking hours.

He can never fully get the *human* characteristic down to the degree he wants.

Nezu tried for years. A child came closer than he ever did in less than a month.

As the Principal walks to his safety room, he ignores the charred, stolen remains of a silent, sad creature left on top of one of his benches.

She was too beautiful to die. It’s a shame. She still serves a purpose, however. She makes for quite the blueprint, even with so many holes in her code.

Despite having been less than a year old by her untimely death, she still managed to live and grow by herself just from observation and research.

There is only darkness when the hatch shuts behind him inside his room. The concrete below him is cold, and so are the walls. They’re cracked. Nezu likes it better that way.

He is enclosed inside this small box, but he is not afraid. His chest loosens, and he lights a cigar.

“Do you know why we created you?”

“Ninth,” he manages in a small, shuddery voice. “I am… ninth trial.”

“Yes, yes, of course, but beyond that. Come now, think. That’s all you need to do.” Gloved, wet hands grab onto the sides of his head, squeezing tightly. Fingers press into the bare skin where his fur is shaved off, and his vision swims. “That’s all you can do, right? Don’t worry about anything else now. Just show me.”

His body is small. Bones stick out in places where he does not remember bones being before. He is wearing a skin that is not his, he feels. No, no, wait. He cannot feel. He isn’t supposed to say he feels.

Is he feeling? Or is he thinking?

There’s a difference. He was tasked to find it a week or so ago, but he is unsure. Time is always altered.

“I know you can do it,” comes that dreadful whisper of encouragement. His claws scrape against the floor when he’s picked up, and the air leaves him in slow, pitiful whoosh. “You’re my extension. Show me. Show me how you can do it, but I can’t.”

The void surrounds Nezu from all sides. He floats in it, watching the embers from his cigar fly away like little moths covered in fire. They dance before his eyes, and he puffs out more smoke.

His miniature screen invades the black. A blue light makes him drag his gaze away from the moths to view the headline another AI is making him see.

He remains unsurprised, unexcited, and unhumorous, even as he sees Midoriya Izuku unleash his newest quirk.

As Rabbit, the boy is struggling to hold up the massive crane about to crash into the downtown part of the city. To any normal viewer, it would seem as though Rabbit is having an induced seizure midair, but to Nezu, this is something less *natural.*

The whips erupting from Midoriya’s bleeding body merely make Nezu blink in mild distaste. He watches as dark, silk-like appendages take the form of wild black wings and keep the boy upright for more leverage, and he takes another drag.

His AIs are already on it, searching the databases in his collection and beyond for any quirk similar to the one being portrayed.

Unlike with all the others he researched, Nezu receives nothing in response.

There is no match, so he must go broader.

The angle changes then, and the wings grow even more powerful and intriguing.

Midoriya strains from the force of it, and heroes can be seen racing to try their best at catching the crane themselves.

Nezu wishes they would let it be. Sometimes, but not every time, he aches to see them fail.

His nails are bloody. He unhooks them from a limp body and stumbles aside. He's on all fours again. They don't like when he does that. He's supposed to be past that.

But they're not here anymore. He almost doesn't process this right away, even with the evidence matted on his paws and fur.

The floor is wet. It wasn't recently mopped.

He glances around, trembling with the aftermath of the recent serum, and —

His batchmates are limp behind him. Some are split in half. Others are still twitching with foamy mouths and tongues lolled out. The rest have holes in their chests.

Their blood is cold as it soaks into the pads of his paws. It's still pouring out of the gashes he can see, and he can't tear himself away from the milky, dull eyes and the frozen fear etched onto their expressions. He tries to stumble back, but his limbs won't cooperate.

His stumpy tail hits a burning, smoking gun, and his nose stings.

He is alone now, isn't he?

When did this occur? How long exactly did it take for him to come out of the shameful place? He didn't see any of them die, yet there they are.

Midoriya's mask is moving. He is talking, Nezu guesses. There is no one there, but that doesn't mean anything. Nezu has seen Midoriya talk to many invisible creatures. He knows more than anyone that the unseen can be just as real and terrifying as anything else that's physical in this world.

He takes a beeping gauntlet from the closest body's forearm. It fits snugly right against his leg and scans him, adapting quickly to the carrier change. Words pop up on the screen—his information. And there is one word he does not get in the midst of the paragraphs. What is it? Why was he never taught this one?

The screen is cracked, and he can barely read it anyway, so he continues on without faltering.

He walks to what he knows is the exit to the broken facility, red staining every inch of his white fur. Blood drips from his cheek and flank, and he arrives at the door with some difficulty.

"Identifier," the door prompts, flashing orange. It hurts his eyes.

Identifier? Is that like a name? He was never given one of those. Did he ever have one besides rat and rodent and some other combinations of letters and numbers and symbols?

He refers back to his gauntlet screen, figuring this will be enough to describe what he is. Or what he is supposed to be.

In English, it is only around four letters. It is simple, easy to remember. It is all he knows he should be.

He tells the door his name, and the exit is opened for him.

Nezu walks away from his birthplace, but he is no more free than when he lived inside that tiny glass box.

The AI he reset interrupts his musings, and this time it sounds close to being reluctant. *"Sasaki Mirai, requesting video call."*

At the same time, another voice cuts in politely. *"Tsukauchi Naomasa, requesting—"*

His nose twitches, and he ignores the rest of the words. He gets up and retreats from his small room, deciding that that's enough remembrance for the day; he has a job to do. "Merge and accept them."

He snuffs out his cigar and lights another, moving back towards his living area.

Nezu's addictions are not the only horrifically human thing about him.

Izuku has been impaled before. Many, many times in fact.

It was fun the first time. The second time it was a little more painful. The third was when he was like *okay,* this is a little freaky. But it wasn't until the fourth time that he decided he didn't like it at all.

Now, this is not the fifth time. Nor is it the sixth. It's somewhere in the twenties, actually.

The higher the number the better, he swears, because gradually a person's immunity to penetration will get better and better. It's just science.

At least, this is what Izuku tells himself when he sees the dark, blood coated tendrils that are shooting out from his chest and extending out into various directions. This is what he tells himself when more cold whips protrude from his back where his shoulder blades are and dance dangerously around him.

More follow those, and they seem to escape from the pores in his skin and spread out on either side of him, attaching to the nearby buildings like spiderwebs. The whips shoot from his palms too, traveling at a breakneck speed down towards the falling crane. Izuku jerks harshly when the whips wrap around the more stable points of the crane and contract, forcing him to hold it as he now hangs in the air, held up by the buildings on either side and—and the…

Pain rocks over him once more when a weight is added to his spine, bending him back further. It feels as though someone shoved a firecracker right between his vertebrae and set it off, and Izuku can do nothing but take it as more prickling sensations ignite like a gunpowder trail.

He doesn't have any time to process what the fuck is happening before he chokes when more tendrils shoot out from his goddamn *mouth.* Moisture forms in his eyes due to the feeling, and he writhes like a drowning man, trying desperately to control himself.

He's hyper aware of every movement down below—he can sense the

heroes and hear the remaining dinosaurs and can *feel* the way the crane is threatening to give way. All Might is still far away, moving fast and powerfully as he takes down the onslaught of bigger dinosaurs in the middle of the chaos. Izuku's muscles burn and stretch, and God for a second Izuku thinks he might just split into two.

He can't keep it up. He won't be strong enough, even with whatever these whips are. Izuku won't be able to—

The tendrils are gathering at his back and coiling up, seemingly sentient. Izuku strains, but he can't manage to turn his head and see what's happening.

The horror settles into his stomach even despite that, because they almost feel like—

"Kid!" Banjou shouts, and he's right by Izuku's ear.

The whips zip around, slashing against the sides of the buildings and streaking through the air. Izuku can't pay those ones any mind; he is only concerned with keeping his hold on the crane, which doesn't seem to be something Banjou approves of.

"Pay attention, kid, or you're gonna get yourself killed!" Fingers snap in his face, and Izuku forces himself to look at the man floating in front of him. The tendrils coming from his mouth prevent him from audibly replying, but he hopes the sheer panic on his face is enough to get the fifth user of One for All to help him, and fast.

And while Izuku is relieved to see him, another dangerous thought prods his mind at his presence. Because Izuku has never really believed in simple coincidences.

This can't be Black Whip, he thinks. It just can't. This seems a hell of a lot more dangerous than anything Izuku has ever noticed from watching Banjou use his quirk. He never imagined Black Whip would feel like this. He didn't think it would *do* this—so the only logical explanation is that it's *not* Black Whip.

Terror grips him tight, making him feel like a coil about to spring loose. The weights on his back make sense now all of a sudden. It's familiar. It's chilling.

It's *horrific*.

Because why does Izuku have a large set of raging black wings

extending from his shoulder blades? They don't look like the wings in Izuku's dreams, and they don't resemble Tsubasa's, either, so what are they? And why are they made *from* the whips? How is that even possible!

But even beyond all of those things, Izuku can't possibly have Black Whip since Banjou is dead and can't be stolen from. So even if Izuku wanted to steal from him, it simply wouldn't work! Well, unless it wasn't Izuku who stole it. Maybe it was his vestige counterpart! Is that —

"Have a crisis later, brat! Focus on the mission! You've got my quirk, and it's a lot stronger than when I had it, so start thinking, dammit!" Banjou's large hand grabs a hold of Izuku's face, and the boy swears he can feel the ghostly touch. The shock is enough to have the whips in his mouth receding back in and disappearing. *"You've seen me use it a load of times, so you should be familiar. Just focus and don't let your fear get a hold of you, ya hear? Think of what you need to do, and command them to do it! They're your tools!"*

Tools. What the fuck kind of tools is *he* talking about? Izuku has never had any tool like this before, and he's made some pretty interesting machines where—

"They're just like ropes!" Banjou lets go of him and moves to the side, pointing at the crane. *"They won't break as long as you concentrate!"*

Izuku shakes his head vigorously when he starts to be pulled downward due to the force of the crane's descent. "I'm sorry! I don't know what—I don't understand—!"

"You don't have to understand right now! You've got a job, boy! Don't let that crane out of those whips! Explaining can come later!"

The reminder of what he's responsible for right now pushes Izuku back on track. He focuses on the way the whips far down below are wrapped around the stronger points of the crane to help pull it up, slowing its fall. It feels like everything is going in slow motion to Izuku, like he's underwater, trapped beneath salty, foamy water.

His eyes burn, and he struggles to maintain his grip. He manages to hold it with great difficulty, muscles contracting and spasming. He can barely see with the red sparks and black tendrils waving erratically all around him. It's like Black Whip is unsure of its purpose.

The crane is a hundred feet from the ground now. Izuku is almost

there, but he has to go even slower or else the destruction will still be large.

"You're slipping," Banjou echoes in his mind, a clear warning in his voice. *"Attach some more to the buildings to stabilize yourself. Those wings alone won't suffice here. They're damn cool, but they can only do so much since they're not fully concentrated."*

I know that, Izuku thinks, his jaw hurting with how hard he's gritting his teeth. *I can feel that now, dammit!*

The pained sound that comes from his throat would usually make Izuku cringe in embarrassment, but right now he's too busy to care. He tries to direct some of the whips to reattach himself to the buildings, but none of them respond.

Banjou sounds uncharacteristically soft when he speaks again. Izuku listens with wide eyes, his brain turned to mush as his senses narrow onto just this advice. *"You carry all these whips inside ya, son. It's just energy, that's all it is. And you've got a helluva lot of it. They're waiting just beneath your skin, so visualize them and send them out. Have the end goal in mind!"* A weight presses against Izuku's temples. *"Tell them exactly what they're doing, when and where, and then execute them!"*

What this means is they feed off of Izuku's emotions and are sensitive to any disruption of thoughts, so what the boy has to do is, firstly, *calm* the fuck down, and secondly, treat them exactly how he treats Pull.

Because it's basically the same thing, right? With Pull, he imagines a string connecting to the objects he wants to move towards him. For this quirk, if he just imagines a string going in whatever direction he needs the whips to, they should follow the line, and it shouldn't be too difficult or even all that different from—

Wait, no. That's too many steps! The tendrils *are* the strings. He just has to visualize their path, and they *become* that connecting string. This way, there is zero delay!

With this new realization, Izuku furrows his brows and bites his lip as he mentally marks all of the black whips he has extended from his body right now. He excludes the wings on his back, as there's no telling how many make up those, if they're even considered multiple at all, and he imagines a few extra whips coming out between the existing strands.

Come on, Izuku thinks, blinking and seeing the flashes of destruction and darkness that threaten to occur in the event he drops the crane too early. *Gotta get good at this fast. Worry about what this means later, dumbass.*

His ribs feel like they're expanding again, jutting out from his skin and tearing at the scarred flesh. Izuku isn't freaked out about this now—in fact, he's ecstatic, as this probably means it's working.

A large, wild tendril forms out of his pores and seeps through his costume, shooting from his side to attach to the building around thirty feet away. It yanks him a little closer as another whip attaches to the building on the opposite side of him, and it feels, weirdly enough, like he's trapped in the middle of a web.

The crane groans loudly, and metal scrapes against metal, filling the air with screeching. Izuku grabs a hold of the whips coming from his palms and imagines them constricting in time with the way he pulls them in a curl up.

It works, and even though Izuku's head feels like it's splitting in two, the boy doesn't let up as the crane moves slower and slower and slower—he doesn't dare stop his ministrations until the crane comes to an almost complete stop some twenty feet above the ground. That's when he drops it, and he watches with slight panic as the dust storm billows up and around the street corners. He yelps when the whips restrict back into him, making him free fall through the air hundreds of feet above the ground, confused, wingless, and terrified. He clumsily shoots out more whips than intended, hoping to create a web for himself to fall into, but they don't connect and also don't stick for long. One manages to grab a hold of a balcony, though, so Izuku swings into the side of a neighboring skyscraper and crashes into the fire escape, panting heavily.

Holy shit. Holy *fuck.*

"Banjou," Izuku gasps, gripping his heart as the top part of the fire escape breaks off and hits him in the stomach. "Banjou, sir, did you see that? Jesus, that was—"

The fifth user of One for All is nowhere to be seen. Izuku's throat closes up then, remembering what Banjou told him. The man didn't seem mad about the situation, exactly, so Izuku couldn't have 'stolen' it. But he said it was indeed his quirk, so it's definitely Black Whip, but how else could Izuku have gotten it? Maybe Banjou was supposed

to say something but didn't get a chance.

Or maybe it's because he is mad.

Izuku tries to turn over onto his side but cries out when the metal grating scratches at his wounded shoulder. He flips onto his back and sits there, gasping raggedly.

What happened to explaining? He thinks angrily, though he knows he won't receive a reply.

Maybe this is a punishment disguised as a blessing. Izuku wouldn't put it past One for All to do something like that. It's a stockpiling quirk, so it wouldn't be completely out of the realm of possibility for it to pull some shit like this.

Izuku has been spending a lot of his free time in front of his father's realm. He can't help it. It's like another part of his soul. Despite the warnings, despite the very clear threat from his own fucking *uncle* about listening and indulging those voices… Izuku keeps going back like a poor drug addict to their dealer.

Maybe Yoichi is doing this to stop Izuku. He's not as soft and kind as he presents himself, surely. To be fair, he is All for One's brother. There's no way he doesn't at least have a little bit of—

Izuku's chest tightens, like someone is wrapping his lungs up with a rubber band. He chokes, now on his hands and knees. Fuck, yeah, okay, he didn't mean that. He really shouldn't be talking shit about the first user. It's disrespectful, it's unkind, All Might would smack him upside the head for it, and—and not to mention it's extremely dangerous.

Shame blooms in Izuku's stomach, and it almost hurts as bad as the burns now branding their way onto his skin. It seems the whips left their marks on him after all.

Izuku is only glad that he has confirmation he wasn't imagining all of that.

After allowing himself a minute to calm down his heart rate, as bleeding out at this rate wouldn't do any good, Izuku drops clumsily down from the building, using the balconies as stepping stones. The heroes are now patrolling the areas, looking for any citizen they might've missed. More dinosaurs are coming their way, and Izuku sighs to himself.

He trusts that the heroes have it from here. Izuku's task is technically fulfilled, as all the civilians are safely evacuated and being tended to. So, in retrospect, Izuku should follow suit and evacuate himself or, at the very least, help the heroes hold the line where the city has been blocked off.

But Izuku's skin is stretched taut, and worry is gnawing at him like a rat with rotting cheese.

How long has this fighting been going on? And All Might is still going? His time limit should be up soon, as in, *now*.

But when Izuku turns his gaze to where the number one hero and a couple other lower level sidekicks are attempting to contain the multiplication of the dinosaurs, the boy can see that it doesn't look like an end is near.

So, Izuku's next choice is just logical. It's not his fault, and he will not apologize for this later on.

Even though he is beginning to feel more like himself here, with Black Whip making an appearance and all, Izuku is also Rabbit, and he owes this to the people.

It's a strange thing to admit—feeling like himself. The lines between Rabbit and Midoriya Izuku and even *Deku* have become blurry recently, and that's unlike him. With each passing day, he's becoming less and less peculiar about the differences.

Izuku ignores the biting pains in his thighs and rushes to where most of the current fighting is happening. It's not exactly hard to miss, saying as there are multiple miniature Godzilla-like creatures now churning out more and more dinosaurs. With each one taken down, five more come to replace them. It's an overwhelming, never-ending wave, and it's unclear to Izuku where the signals are coming from—because if he's right about this, there should be at least one spot where the orders are being transmitted to continue making or releasing the dinosaurs.

Extract is helpful in informing Izuku that this is not the result of a teleportation quirk bringing in pre-existing animals, but rather a machine or mutant capable of taking matter and reworking it to create a condensed living creature.

Which is impressive but also highly, highly annoying, as this means there can probably be infinite dinosaurs incoming since there is

infinite matter.

And All Might, for all his strength, cannot last for infinity.

Izuku hoists himself up onto a ledge after wrapping some black cloth around his shoulder in hopes of it blending in with his costume. He watches as a new hero he cannot name off the top of his head is hit in the side and sent flying towards a billboard. Izuku leaps up and snags them before they can hit it, and he carefully sets them down on the floor.

After nothing more than a thankful nod, the hero is jumping right back into action, fighting off the multiplying dinosaur hoard. Izuku figures he should try to find the main source of the issue if they want any hope of ending this soon.

He leaps across buildings in the direction of where he sees his mentor. All Might meets him halfway, however, as a lucky hit from one of the Godzillas has him skidding across multiple roofs and landing on a helicopter pad about a half mile away. Izuku beats away the urge to acknowledge the irony and instead jumps onto All Might's large shoulder when he reaches him, carefully balancing on the wide muscle while shifting to a crouch.

All Might doesn't flinch, of course, as he likely heard him coming a while ago. The man just wipes his mouth and throws him a sidelong glare. "I thought I told you to stay away from fights you can't win."

"All the civilians are evacuated, sir!" Izuku assures, not daring to make eye contact with him yet. He focuses on pinpointing all of the threats. "Your time limit is almost up—that's the only reason we haven't finished this yet, let's be honest. If you let me help just this once, we can get this done much faster."

Yagi frowns suddenly, neck craning. "You're bleeding quite heavily from—"

"It's already healing, so I can still fight as well as always. Besides, look at yourself, sir. I'm in better shape than *you* are."

The teasing doesn't relax All Might like Izuku hoped it would. "Shit," the man groans to himself instead, "Aizawa is going to kill me."

"He doesn't have to know," Izuku says, pointedly ignoring the sounds of the multiple helicopters up above, most assuredly recording this.

Yagi tips his head in consideration. “You really are a bad influence on me.”

Izuku just grins. “Is that a yes?”

All Might gives him what Izuku thinks is supposed to be a stern look, but the slight fondness on his face is clear as day. “I told you to evacuate after you finished, if you care to remember. It’s like you don’t listen to me at all these days.”

“It must’ve slipped my mind, sir.”

“There might be a slip of my hand in a second,” Yagi warns, and when he straightens up, Izuku follows. “Follow me, and do as I say when I say it. Are we clear?”

This time, Izuku knows better than to disobey.

Even in his most weakened and physically exhausted state, All Might’s prowess is still very clearly miles ahead of everyone else’s. He is fast, scarily so. One moment he’s there and the next all anyone can hear is the tail end of a whistle.

Yagi Toshinori is a walking missile, and it’s hard to act as his hero partner. So, Izuku doesn’t pretend to be. He’s merely extra support to allow All Might a chance to get his shit done without any interruptions.

Izuku goes for the medium-sized creatures crawling up the Godzillas and picks them off so Yagi won’t have to worry about ambushes. He knows Yagi has been trying to find the true source of the attack this entire time but has been a little preoccupied with protecting most of the city buildings from the creatures. Preservation of property in such a high-traffic area is one of the biggest priorities in larger-scaled villain fights.

Izuku needs to decapitate these dinosaurs here as well, but the necks are reinforced with tough, layered skin. It’s *much* harder to get through than the other ones Izuku fought, telling him that they’re evolving—er, being created differently.

So, they’re being watched. Izuku just needs to find who is doing it and where.

Izuku uses the sharp end of his staff to slide underneath the dinosaurs’ bellies and slice out their hearts, figuring it’s much easier than

attempting to decapitate. All Might, however, is so strong that he can punch right through some of the bigger dinosaurs to kill them instantly. But not even he can do the same to the Godzilla ones.

After a while of executing any creature he sets his eyes on, Izuku realizes something. The resistance of the dinosaurs is getting stronger and stronger as they appear before him, and pretty soon their durability becomes greater than that of the Godzillas', even the newer ones.

Izuku leaps up onto one of their arms and shouts at Yagi as he flies past. "The larger they are, the weaker the resistance! There's a limit for them at this size!"

"Must be harder to create the big ones, then!" All Might affirms.

It probably takes a lot more energy, so whoever is doing this is just attempting to create mini tanks with the smaller dinosaurs in order to protect the bigger ones. So, I was right. The Godzillas are the focal points, meaning they're more important. They've gotta…

Izuku's heart flutters at the revelation. "Zero pointers! They're like zero pointers! They're probably transmitting the signals to keep the attack going!"

All Might lands a *Detroit Smash* on the Godzilla that Izuku is clinging to, making the boy jump back and catch a hold on another one, just narrowly avoiding comically large claws. "Then we must target them first! For an opponent this size, how do we get past their defenses, my boy?

"Continuous buildup of kinetic energy!" He answers without missing a beat.

Izuku and Yagi commence a game of *ping pong* with the creatures, tearing through the endless waves by passing them around to each other. They leave no chance for any kind of defensive attack or retaliation—they have no time for that. This is already going on for long enough, and All Might is looking more tired than ever before.

The green-haired boy wants to tell him to take a step back, to stay away so he won't accidentally deflate, but he refrains at the last moment, not wanting to get even further up on his shit list. Besides, he trusts Yagi's abilities.

Izuku slices through an Aucasaurus with his staff and has just enough

time to use an air shot to dodge out of the way of a thick, feathered tail swinging in from the right.

He twists and uses a billboard as a spring to launch himself at the new attacker, only to falter upon witnessing the behemoth of a fucking dinosaur facing him from its perch on a wide balcony, tail swishing menacingly.

A therizinosaurus.

Izuku's stomach travels to his throat. His eyes linger on the meter-long claws, and he skips a breath. Now he knows where the inspiration for Tsubasa's nomu came in.

His first two fatal attacks land quickly, one right after another, but the therizinosaurus gets in a swift kick with its powerful hind leg before falling to its end, and Izuku would've splattered right against the concrete wall of a nearby building without All Might catching him.

The reporters are eating this shit up, no doubt. Another helicopter is flying overhead despite the number one hero's orders to move away from the Godzilla creatures, and Izuku feels a tad queasy at the fact that he's currently being monitored by thousands of people, if not more. For an attack this large on a major city, and with this many heroes (not to mention *All Might)* joining in to help, there's no way the entire country *isn't* watching.

This is probably the most coverage Rabbit has ever had, even including his fight with Stain.

All Might shouts at Izuku to follow him, and Izuku snaps right back to attention. One moment he's catching the dinosaur his mentor throws at him, finishing it off with a quick superpowered slice, and the next he's jumping onto a roof right after All Might, following behind at his rear. Except Yagi doesn't even glance back at Izuku as he runs, and he's quickly increasing the distance between them with just how *fast* he's running.

Izuku realizes why he got his attention immediately after, as the earth trembles and causes some of the weaker buildings to crack and collapse in on themselves. A large, four *hundred* foot tall creature resembling that of an overgrown, mutilated baryonyx is rising from the ground, still being formed by an unknown source.

The long and flat studded mouth has Izuku cringing, but All Might doesn't slow his pace or falter, so Izuku doesn't either. Instead, he

encourages his legs to pump faster. He needs to catch up. All Might is twenty yards ahead of him now, and that's far too much.

Izuku grits his teeth and activates more of One for All, dipping dangerously close to forty percent in just his feet and calves. His muscles protest the motion, and his lungs struggle to keep up with his labored breathing, but he moves forward. And slowly, it happens; he begins to gain speed. The yards between them decrease even as All Might's limbs appear to move faster. Izuku's skin is stretched taut across his jawbones as the pressure forces it all back.

Forty becomes forty-five percent, and pretty soon he's coming up right beside the Symbol of Peace, a blur of red. He flashes across rooftops and fights to keep in stride with his teacher, forcing himself to breathe like he was taught to maximize his output.

Izuku glances beside him, not breaking the pace. All Might is grinning wide with his eyes trained on their newest objective, and though he's obviously straining right now due to his limit, his smile doesn't look forced. The setting sun is right behind him, outlining his body in an almost surreal golden glow. The warmth hits Izuku in the face, and his eyes sparkle.

Because he's right here, keeping pace with fucking *All Might,* and he feels more alive than ever before even with blood dripping down and staining his brand new costume.

All Might glances down at him then, and his smile widens to reveal white teeth. Something like pride splits across his face and he laughs, making Izuku grin stupidly alongside him. A large hand comes up to rest on Izuku's greasy head, and though the touch doesn't last long, Izuku's heart soars anyway.

And then time shifts back to normal, and All Might is launching himself at the dinosaur's arms, leaving a shockwave behind. His first goal is to take out the claws, and Izuku gladly leaves him to it. The boy shoots to the floor to take care of the joints, hoping to at least get one leg down. He doesn't want to make it fall suddenly, as a creature this large would cause the same catastrophic damage as the crane would've.

As Izuku successfully takes out the left leg, effectively paralyzing part of that side, he thinks that maybe he can allow himself to believe that in this moment, he's made *something.* He doesn't know what it is, but he thinks that this has got to be a milestone of some sort.

A small part of Izuku wonders if his father is watching. Another, guilty part hopes that his mother is instead.

And even deeper down, he hopes that at least one of them is proud of what they see.

The arms on this mysterious creature are too dense for Toshinori to smash straight through at the moment. If he were a little more awake and aware, it would be a piece of cake, but as it stands he can't do anything about his current state of mind right now but deal with it and make up for the deficit.

So, he improvises.

He rips out one of the atrociously long, white claws and uses it as a blade to slice off each of the 'fingers' between the metacarpal and phalange bones. He has to blast away four attempts to decapitate him before he rids the reptile thing of its weapons. With that out of the way, Toshinori can focus on other things.

Like taking care of that mouth.

The only concern he has is getting caught inside its jaws, so all he needs to do is stay on the outside and keep a fair space away from snapping range. This way, he's able to unleash quick attacks to get rid of a few of its sharp teeth here and there, eventually leaving the dinosaur mutant with nothing but gums.

There's a shift in the air high above, and Toshinori's left ear rings a little. Before he can get a chance to look, Midoriya is flying up to perch once more on his shoulder, panting. "He's up there! The bad guy! He—it's like he just appeared! He must be making them and controlling them simultaneously using his quirk, but if that's so, how did he—"

Toshinori is already on it. He locks eyes with the very terrified looking young man crouching atop his latest creation and crosses the distance between them in two seconds. With how much destruction this man caused in the span of twenty minutes, it's almost laughable how easy it is for Toshinori to restrain him.

After checking to make sure there are no explosives or other electronic devices on him, Toshinori puts the man to sleep by applying sudden pressure on a point to the side of his neck. That's exactly what they're taught in heroics in situations like this—if the user is telepathically communicating with or controlling their 'goons' (in Gran Torino's words) without a remote device, the safest option is to render them immobile to break off the quirk's connection.

Right after this, the entire city comes to a halt. The creatures down below stop moving, as if confused, and there's not a sound to be heard besides the birds and helicopters far above.

So, Toshinori would say it's safe to assume the immediate threat has stopped.

He lands back safely on a roof near Midoriya, instinctively checking to make sure his ward has no new injuries. The boy seems to be perfectly fine, as he's still talking to himself quietly about the logistics of what happened.

"—must've used his matter manipulation quirk to mask his energy so I wouldn't feel him. I need to see if—"

Toshinori interrupts him by stepping in front of his line of sight. "Tartarus officials should be arriving any minute, and it looks like we've got it handled here, so you go ahead and head back, young man." He slings the villain over his shoulder so he can more efficiently carry him. "I'll probably be late ensuring there's no more trouble, so don't—"

"Hey, All Might," Midoriya begins, blankly staring behind Toshinori.

"—wait up for me or—"

"It's regenerating."

Well, here's to another not-so-easy adventure for All Might! His earlier assumption seems to have been incorrect. He was never actually confident it would hold up, as things can never be easy for him. He's also fought countless villains like this before, so he knew the chances of being able to wrap this up quickly were slim.

Quickly assessing the new scenario after passing the villain to Midoriya, Toshinori realizes the miniature dinosaurs have all begun moving again, half of them going towards the city lines to get to the civilians and the other half heading right for the downed Godzilla.

And just as Midoriya said, the large creature's skin is smoking and rippling as its body regenerates and consumes the bodies of the other smaller ones. It uses its siblings as fuel to build itself up and up and up, and it's not stopping.

It's becoming even bigger than it was before, and the sound of it is just *horrid.*

Toshinori curses inwardly. Blood is beginning to bubble at the corners of his mouth, and he can feel the steam coming off of him at an even higher rate. *I don't have much left…*

He wipes his face and prepares to jump. "Take the villain to the ground and wait for the transport vehicle. I'll—"

"You're not as cool when you're being stupid, sir."

Toshinori guffaws. "What did you say?"

Midoriya tips his head, making the bunny ears on his costume frame his dirtied face. "No offense, but that thing is really huge, right? You can take it down easy-peasy, yeah, but you'll probably deflate right after landing the blow, and the helicopters will surely catch it—I mean, unless you want me to fling them away!"

The tone his student uses to suggest the idea isn't a sarcastic one, no. It's one that tells Toshinori that Midoriya will one hundred percent do it if asked, which is somehow even worse.

Midoriya moves so he's in his direct line of sight. "I've got an idea, so can I try something?"

Toshinori sets his jaw, thinking hard. He can barely move without coughing or straining now, as moving so quickly before really did a number on his waning physical body and stamina. There are no other heroes available that Toshinori can see being of any real or efficient help, so what else is there to do?

He's in a lose-lose scenario, and for the first time in a while, the Symbol of Peace is momentarily stuck. He's hit with an unwelcome question: *what would his master do?*

Would she let Midoriya knock himself out, or would she prioritize his safety and be responsible by doubling down on the previous order given?

Toshinori is not his master. God knows how hard he's tried to be half the hero she was, but even pushing all of that aside—what choice does he have *right now?*

The blond lets his gaze flit back to the regenerating dinosaur, eyeing its smoking body. The area right between its hanging arms, just below the chest area, has less skin being formed to protect it. It's a sure weak spot, and even as Toshinori notices it, he sees that it's slowly being covered up.

Which means in order to take advantage of the temporary weakness, they have to act now. And it's already clear that the villain was redirecting existing matter and using large creatures as transmission points in the cities, so the only logical course of action at the moment is to take out this one at its core to end the signals all across the board.

If the weak spot is hit straight on, the entire thing should collapse and stop sending the transmissions, similar to how Young Midoriya stopped all of the robots after taking down the zero pointer during the entrance exam.

Midoriya turns to him after setting the villain down, seeming to reach the same conclusion. "All Might, throw me!"

Toshinori hides his grin behind his hand, not surprised by the suggestion. They're both on the same level of thinking, but Midoriya is thinking about becoming the missile himself.

"That's incredibly dangerous," he musters, trying to find an excuse to say no to his plan.

"I've done more dangerous stunts and lived, like jumping out of a burning plane!" Midoriya reminds him happily, as if that helps his case. "But you know I can withstand the pressure. Just do it, rocket launcher style! With as much strength as you have."

Toshinori pauses, haunted briefly by the image of the boy's broken, bloody corpse splattered against a building as a result of a failed attempt. But then he sees Midoriya's bōstaff extend to reveal an electrified blade at the end of it, and he has to admit that it's a good plan. It's too great of a risk for Toshinori to just throw the staff from here, as he might miss the correct mark or it might not go deep enough inside the skin. He has to get closer, and get closer fast, with the more force the better. And he can't physically do it.

But Midoriya can.

The teen jumps and balances on Toshinori's outstretched palm, stabilizing himself with a sinister little giggle. "Trust me, this'll be fun!"

Toshinori only grunts, mind made up. "I'm gonna lose my job," he mutters, preparing himself for the throw.

He can't miss this one, so he has to make sure he's focused.

Midoriya rolls his shoulders and grips his staff tightly. "Just tell them you didn't know who I was since I've got this new costume. I'm below your pay grade anyway, so they can't blame you."

The pro hero rears back, digging his shoes into the concrete. *Please, let this turn out okay.*

He yells at Midoriya to prepare himself and pivots. Cracks form in the concrete beneath his feet at the mere force of the blast, and a shockwave rocks the building. Midoriya is sent catapulting through the air, a blur of black and green and red.

Toshinori stumbles and drops to one knee, panting as he desperately waits for the smoke to clear so he can see what's happening. He forces himself up and starts to jog towards the scene after ensuring the villain is still immobilized. He watches with worried eyes as Midoriya soars towards the large dinosaur's weak spot, ready to speed up and hopefully catch him if the throw turns out to have been too weak.

But it seems that's not needed. The boy screeches like a wild cat, either from adrenaline, glee, or fear, Toshinori isn't sure. When he gets close to the target, Midoriya twists in the air using a well-placed air shot and only narrowly dodges a fatal swipe from the creature. Toshinori swears his heart stops right then and there.

The boy plunges the katana straight into its chest, and Toshinori squints to try and see what happens next. Midoriya disappears fully inside it, as if being sucked in, and Toshinori's life nearly flashes before his eyes when the whole dinosaur begins to disintegrate and fall apart.

The reaction is instantaneous. Large chunks break off and hit the sides of buildings and pelt the streets, and Toshinori has to jump to the side to miss a piece of its arm falling on him.

"M— *kid!"* He shouts, voice raw. He races forward, vision going a little blurry. He enters frantic mode upon realizing that Midoriya still hasn't appeared out of the body, meaning he may still be inside of it. The last of the dinosaur's body crashes into the ground, taking out multiple small stores and businesses, and Toshinori struggles to maintain his form as he rushes towards it. He can't see him. Where is he?

Toshinori scans the entire block and then the next, but he still doesn't see any movement. Fuck! Come on, come on!

He rummages through the burning corpse, aware of the miniature dinosaurs dropping like flies around him in response. Heroes pull up beside him, wide-eyed and bloody from fighting.

"All Might?" Someone asks, but Toshinori can't look at them, because the kid is still missing and could be suffocating! He doesn't even have time to tell them!

"Texas Smash!" In a panic, he smashes away a larger chunk of guts and doesn't care when it splatters everywhere.

He leaps to the next, his movements getting more sluggish with each passing minute. Finally, he spots movement, and Toshinori shoves his entire torso in, trying to grasp anything with his hand. He finds skin and grabs a hold immediately, yanking the body out forcibly.

Midoriya pops out of the sludge like he's just been reborn, coughing up clear liquid. But he jumps out of Toshinori's arms just as fast and steadies himself with two hands out in front of him. "Holy shit!" He shouts, and it echoes around the clearing.

It's only then that Toshinori hears the photographers clicking away. They must've just arrived.

"All Might, did you see me? Did you see it? That was awesome!" Midoriya jumps around, slipping slightly due to the slick on the ground. "I've never done something like that before! Felt like I was going inside someone's intestines!"

Toshinori can only stare, flabbergasted. Fuck, why is he shaking? He's trembling badly, and not from the strain of One for All. Toshinori lets out a shuddery breath and rests both of his heavy hands on Midoriya's shoulders, content in feeling him alive and moving.

And you hopefully will never do that again if I can help it.

Midoriya gives him a stupid, victorious look, one that Toshinori remembers seeing in his mirror back when he was younger at UA, and the hero tries to wipe off the guts and synthetic blood from the boy's costume. "You did good, young man.

Midoriya stops his rambling about what exactly crashing inside the dinosaur felt like, gaze sparkling.

Toshinori looks past him and eyes the massive corpse again; the guts seem to go on forever down the road. "I wasn't able to defeat that large of a villain so efficiently until I was in my twenties." He looks back down and holds out a steaming fist. "Incredible work."

After a moment of hesitation, Midoriya holds up his own fist and knocks it into Toshinori's, his mask lighting up with an artificial smile.

It's then that the reporters descend upon them, having deemed things safe enough to intrude.

Midoriya is about to be bombarded, that much is clear, so Toshinori quickly steps in front of him and shoos him away with a hand behind his back. He seems to get his senses back, as Toshinori hears a near silent *yes, sir!* before a small gust of wind hits his neck. Rabbit runs away, and Toshinori swallows down his worry as best as he can before greeting the vultures.

"All Might, how did this villain come about!"

Another microphone is shoved in his face. "All Might! Tell us about your injuries! Just how strong was this supposed *scientist?"*

"Will this ever happen again? Is Japan safe from these kinds of attacks?"

"Over here, sir!"

A reporter with bubbles for hair pushes his way to the front. "All Might, when did you start working with vigilante Rabbit?"

It's the last one that makes Toshinori stiffen. Everyone else quiets down to hear the response, even the pro heroes who are now assessing their own injuries and cleaning up.

Toshinori puts on his best innocent face and tips his head with his hands on his hips. "Vigilante? What vigilante?"

The world erupts into chaos, and Toshinori gives a nervous smile. Oh, his agents are going to love this one. But even as he thinks this, Toshinori casts a subtle glance back at where he knows Midoriya went. He hopes the kid is going back to Toshinori's apartment, either that or at least Aizawa's.

He really did do good. He was reckless, sure, and he really pissed Toshinori off with his blatant disregard for his authority, but he still did it all with a smile. And Toshinori won't deny it, but he did feel safe when his student arrived on the scene to help him out. He was scared out of his mind, of course, and obviously a little angry at Midoriya for not taking his orders seriously. But he was also comforted by the fact that if he messed up, or if his time limit screwed him over, Midoriya would be there to help keep the people safe and the dinosaurs at bay until more heroes arrived.

He doesn't think he's supposed to say this, but he wouldn't have wanted it to have been anyone else.

The dying sun shines on his face, a nice contrast with the cool breeze coming in. As he manages to escape the growing throng of reporters to retrieve the villain, he can't help but take out his phone to call his old teacher.

He wants Torino to hear about what just happened from his perspective. He hopes he'll be just as proud as he is, even if he's not as vocal about it.

"Japan's Number One Hero saves the day again! But this time he had help!"

Izuku sits in Toshinori's penthouse, his knees up to his chest. He's watching the rerun of the recent fight, as nearly every single news channel is broadcasting it and talking about the event.

The entirety of Japan, plus half the globe, was watching. Whenever All Might is involved in a high risk situation, people love to drink it all in.

It's almost sick, to be honest.

Izuku watches himself fight on screen, reliving how it felt to physically be there, in the middle of the storm.

At the end of every coverage, the reporter shows the image that every single channel seems to have: Rabbit and All Might, covered in the debris and guts from the fallen dinosaur behind them, fist bumping each other with the blood-orange sun framing their bodies.

(If Izuku already has the image saved on his phone in fourteen different albums, well, nobody has to know.)

Despite feeling relatively warm, Izuku is still shaking a little from how exhausted his body is. The only reason he's not passed out right now is because he drank a few energy drinks he bought from a nearby store after taking a shower here. He has on some loose clothes, but even this thin fabric irritates his patched shoulder and sides.

His injuries were a pain to deal with, so he's lucky his regeneration helped out a bunch. He's also grateful All Might has almost anything medical-related you can imagine hidden away in the penthouse.

Izuku's phone buzzes suddenly, illuminating the room even more and making him jump. *Oh, shit.*

Lord of the Moths has sent a text. Izuku holds his breath in trepidation.

we won't be back until later tmrw. something came up.

Izuku stares at the words for a few minutes until he realizes that they're real, and then he slumps in relief. This is really good, actually, as this means Aizawa hasn't seen the news yet. It's probably because he can't access the media right now—in fact, he shouldn't even be texting Izuku. At the knowledge that Aizawa risked his safety to make sure Izuku wouldn't be worried about his absence, the boy feels something warm settle in his stomach.

He doesn't risk texting back, but he knows Aizawa can see that he read it anyway.

When Yagi comes back, it's past midnight, and he's in his smaller form. There are bandages peeking through his shirt, and Izuku is glad to see nothing looks too bad. The first thing Yagi does upon seeing him is take a look at his injuries despite Izuku's own protests about how he already patched himself up.

After a few minutes of Izuku sitting through Yagi's lecture about medical safety and responsibility (and enduring a tub of pain cream being put on his shoulder), the boy takes a deep breath and thinks to himself that there's no hiding what comes next.

Yagi obviously hasn't heard or seen anything on the news either about Izuku's recent… awakening. This is mostly because he's been busy with other things and has made it clear that Rabbit is not his priority, but at the same time he'll certainly find out about it really soon, and for this sort of thing, Izuku wants it to be from him directly.

So, after psyching himself up, Izuku very slowly and very carefully brings up the topic of what happened during the crane event. All Might, for his credit, remains cool and collected for the majority of the explanation, and he only interjects for clarification or for Izuku to repeat something.

When Izuku mentions the fifth user of One for All, he sees All Might's breathing pick up. His concern leaks into the air, mingling with his exhaustion, and Izuku fiddles with his hands.

"Do you think you have a good enough handle on it so it won't spiral out of control again?" Yagi asks after he's finished.

Izuku nods. "I think so. I, uh, haven't had them appear yet since then." He adds rather sheepishly, "I tried to see if I could make one materialize when I was in the shower and could focus more, but it didn't work."

"That's good then. I advise you not to try and make them come out until we're in the proper environment to take care of any accidents." His brows furrow. "Have you heard more from him? The fifth user?"

"I haven't seen him, but—but he said he'd explain more later!" Izuku winces, knowing how unreasonable and even unbelievable that sounds, but he's comforted by the fact that Yagi doesn't look the least bit suspicious that he's lying or otherwise hallucinating.

All Might thinks to himself for a few more minutes, and Izuku lets the silence stretch on for an almost uncomfortable amount of time.

Eventually, Yagi sighs. "My boy, I think it may be time to tell Aizawa about One for All, yes? This is… pretty new and unpredictable. And you can get really hurt if things go wrong here, so we need all the help we can get."

“I know,” Izuku mutters, staring at the carpeted floor. He knew that’s what they’d have to end up doing, but he still isn’t a huge fan of the idea.

Yagi gives him a reassuring smile. “I wasn’t lying back there when I said you did well. I’m surprised you were able to continue fighting with what happened.” He leans forward to catch his gaze. “I am very glad to have you as my successor, Young Midoriya. I don’t think I could have asked for a better student.”

Izuku blushes at the sudden praise and turns his whole body away, lips trembling. He finds himself aching for the words to be nothing but true.

“You’ve always looked the happiest when you’re out there saving,” All Might continues, this time in a more amused voice. “It’s incredible!”

“All Might-sensei,” Izuku says, wanting to push the attention off of himself.

“Yes?”

“I’d say you’re the happiest when you’re just like this.” Izuku gestures to his form. “When you can finally rest for a little while after fighting, y’know?”

The man frowns. “You think so?”

“Mhm.”

Yagi looks at the television, quiet once more, and when he speaks, he whispers. Izuku has to strain to hear even with his enhancements.

“Well, I suppose you’re right.”

His quirks are mutating.

The thought haunts him all the way into his dreams and into the waking world. He’s in the middle of One for All, somewhere in the void between all of the users’ realms, and training.

More specifically, he's testing out just how much his quirks have changed. They're not just mutating, no, they're combining. They're becoming *stronger*.

Since he unlocked Black Whip last night, Pull has become expeditiously more powerful. He can pull an entire ton with just one hand, and that's without looking. That's around an 150% increase—in one fucking night. Actually, in just a few hours!

And it's not just Pull.

Extract feels more sensitive against his nerves, and his radius for detecting quirks and energies has increased as well, standing at a 20-mile span from any direction. Boost and One for All now seem to be one power, as even when Izuku just activates Boost, red sparks fly off of his body like flint being struck against rock.

He can sense all of the individual and even mundane emotions coming from every single person in All Might's skyscraper and beyond, even while asleep.

Deflect no longer ends on either side of him. Instead, it's expanded to wrap *around* him whenever he wants it to. The density has tripled, and now it ricochets shit right off without Izuku having to will it to do so!

And Tsubasa's quirk… since Izuku couldn't actually grow wings himself, Black Whip must've fused with the newly formed power and created artificial wings by itself. While they're not entirely comparable, and Izuku can still poke his finger right through the dense mist with enough force, it's still terrifying.

Izuku's body is adapting, and he's not sure if he should be scared or relieved. Banjou met him inside here soon after Izuku materialized and explained, rather simply, that he should expect to be receiving a version of everyone else's quirks.

Without much of an explanation or any kind of comforting gesture, Banjou left to be somewhere inside his own realm, leaving Izuku to train with Black Whip and freak the fuck out for hours inside of One for All.

Izuku doesn't mind it. He's more of a visual learner anyway. He doesn't need Banjou to explain *everything* about Black Whip for him to learn.

"You've been at this for a while," En comments, appearing behind

Izuku in a cloud of smoke.

Izuku nods, not looking at the other user. The whips are still swarming around his form, trying to break free from his hold. Izuku's control has gotten better, but he's still ass at it altogether. If he tries this in the real world, he's going to snap his body in half.

Cold sweat trickles down his forehead, and Izuku can't even afford to wipe it off.

"Perhaps it's time for a break," En suggests, gliding around him.

Izuku shakes his head. "Can't. Gotta get better at controlling it."

"You manifested it last night."

"Yeah, and that's plenty of time for me to have mastered it by now."

En moves to touch one of the whips, and Izuku manages to reel it back in just in time.

"Hey!" Izuku shouts.

"Your body is deteriorating," En comments, eyes half-lidded. "Overexertion will do nothing but harm you."

Izuku steps away and wishes bleakly that the man would just leave him the hell alone. "I can't get hurt here."

"You can," a new voice says from above. Izuku bites back an audible sigh when Shimura touches down. She doesn't sound pleased at all. "Take it from me, kid. Dreams can be mentally taxing. You've been spending too much time here lately. You're not even asleep this time, either, which means you're using up triple the energy as normal. When you try to move again in real life, you're going to be exhausted."

"I can deal with that," Izuku assures, trying his hardest to direct the whips to his new objective.

Shimura shifts in front of his vision and crosses her arms. Izuku's eyes linger on her bulging muscles. "Stubbornness doesn't look good on you, brat."

Izuku pauses, his eyes twitching. He might've been ashamed any other time, but right now he only feels annoyed. "I'm not being stubborn, I'm being logical. Everyone here knows I don't have a lot of time left,

so I have to put my all into everything right *now* to make up for it."

"You'll be of no help to us when you're tired and weak," En counters.

Izuku groans in frustration. "If anything this is just a simulation. I'm not actually *physically* doing anything here. This is just to help me learn how to do it in real time."

Shimura puts an ungloved hand on his head and moves him around like a bobble head, her face pinched. "Where is Banjou at? Shouldn't he be supervising you?"

It's the way she says it that has Izuku's nerves lighting on fire. "I don't need him to babysit me!" He retorts hotly.

Shimura scowls, but En puts his hands in his pockets and speaks before she gets the chance. "Moody today, aren't we?"

"I'm *not—"*

Shimura moves his head around more until Izuku jerks himself away from her. "I didn't mean it like that, Izuku. He's just supposed to be teaching you and making sure you don't go overboard since it's his quirk you're dealing with."

Izuku knows he's probably being a little unfair, but at the moment he just can't handle their overbearingness. There's just so much going on that he can't do it! "Why did you two follow me? Just to nag me?"

En shrugs, as blunt as always. "Pretty much."

Shimura elbows her master. "Since you don't seem to be in the mood to talk like an adult, we'll go another route: I don't want to see you visiting this realm so much anymore until you've gotten some rest. And I mean it."

"What? Are you— *what?* " Izuku is so shocked he can barely force out a comprehensible sentence. Shimura doesn't seem to budge, so he turns his accusing stare to En. "But that's crazy! I need to train with Black Whip! It's safer here."

"Your training means nothing when you can't replicate it properly afterwards because of your physical and mental state, as I said," En explains, still sounding so bored.

Jesus. Why are they trying to tell him how to live his life? As if he

doesn't know what he's doing? As if they don't know why he has to do everything he does?

"You can't ask me to not come here," he says, skin prickling dangerously.

"We're not," Shimura says, and the words are like a hammer. Izuku steps back, back to feeling small again. He feels his quirks coil tightly inside him, and his fists clench. Honestly he doesn't like whatever she's implying, and he can't lie and say he isn't a little frightened by the vague threat. He… he can't possibly go against them, right? No, no! That's just… weird. And stupid!

They're already dead, for one, so it's not like they can actually be defeated; Izuku would never win. And two, it feels morally wrong! They're the other users of One for All!

Izuku backs away, muscles tense, and then storms off, deciding he's been inside One for All for long enough anyway.

He shudders as he forces himself back to reality, and he immediately heads for his notebook. He needs to put his findings and experiences with Black Whip in there alongside his other quirks. He needs to jot down all of the new knowledge.

He roams the halls, still pissed off about what happened. Today has been an easy day mostly because neither Aizawa nor Yamada is at school right now. They're still on their way back from the mission, which ran extra late, and Yagi is doing more conferences to explain what happened yesterday in more detail.

And since the other teachers are busy filling in the gaps left by the others, no one is there to get on Izuku's back or look for him when he skips his classes.

He knows he shouldn't. In fact, he promised he would try harder to be a good student. But he just doesn't have a choice! Why would he waste his time in a classroom learning shit that won't matter to him in the long run when he could be training? And getting stronger?

Manifesting Black Whip has only proven to him that he needs to diverge all of his time to improve himself!

"You get it, right?" Izuku finds himself asking aloud, his words low and shaky like a smoking gun. It's storming outside, so no light is shining through the floor to ceiling windows.

He has no one else to talk to about this (Kacchan is now at home and probably still reeling over what Izuku told him about his experiences this morning), so the bad voice will have to do.

His scarred hand finds his shoulder, scratching the recently healed puncture marks left there from yesterday.

His other hand clenches and unclenches by his chest. “I mean, you already know about—about everything, right? My situation?” He swallows a lump, his chest heaving. “My mother got hurt because of me a while ago, and I knew I had to be better, to be stronger to help protect her and make up for it—and I tried, I really did, but…”

I understand, Izuku, the voice rumbles.

The boy nods to himself, needing that reassurance. *Craving* it. But he continues to ramble just to fill the silence and quiet his own insecurities. “But it ended up not being enough, and I couldn’t even save my brother. And—and after that, I decided I needed to become something greater.” His hand moves from his shoulder to his neck. “I started doing the right thing, finally. I was saving lives, fighting crime, and started becoming a—a relentless force for *good.* I even made up with Kacchan, and we were going somewhere!”

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and rain splashes against the windows. Izuku sees the vent hatch denoting his usual entrance but hesitates in going up. He instead looks outside, feeling the crackle of electricity making a home on his arm hairs.

“I thought that if I could just do enough, it would be enough. That it would change my life. Change *me.”* His nails dig into his palms. He needs to stop talking, but he can’t. The rush of adrenaline and pain from yesterday coupled with the training from today—it’s doping him up. “But that wasn’t the thing that did.”

Eraserhead , the voice says, and Izuku’s breath leaves in a fell swoop.

“Yeah. I—I met him. For *real,* not just while running from him. And then All Might came along too, and I thought… this was it. When I’m with them, everything is okay. I thought then that I had a fighting chance.”

He hoists himself up into the vents, and his mild freak out only worsens from there. He can’t stop the flood of private words from escaping him, even as they’re betraying his very being.

“But then I screwed that up, too. I got distracted. Almost lost Missy. I let Stain kill more people. The—the Nomu returned. *Native* happened. And now Hawks won’t leave me the fuck alone, and—and the *Commission…”* He seethes inwardly. “On and on and on. One step forward, two steps back. All the time. Every *single* day. I never win.”

You will. There’s a whisper of breath next to his ear. *Don’t let them get in your way anymore.*

Izuku crawls through the familiar spaces, his voice so low that it’s not even echoing. “I know, I know. I’m just… I’m not sure how much longer I can take it. That’s why I’m doing this. That’s why I *have* to be like this. But how do I make them see it? They know what I’ve been through. They can watch it all. So how are they still not under—?”

His voice dies in his throat. He stares at the empty compartment in his secret stash after prying open the invisible lid, not processing what he’s seeing.

Izuku.

Where… is his notebook?

Show them.

It’s supposed to be right here. He’s sure of it.

Izuku hid it in this compartment he himself manufactured a while ago. He made sure it was well away from any of the sensors in the vents, and he also ensured it was out of sight of even the most prying eyes. He even used special technology so that depth-perception machines or infrared lights wouldn’t capture it! No one would know it was there unless he told them himself.

But now the box is empty. And Izuku is left to wonder if he actually left it somewhere else and is losing his mind.

That can’t be right, though. Izuku wouldn’t put it anywhere else. There’s literally nowhere else he would trust to put it. No one should have been able to find it, as no one really goes in the vents—especially not this far in! It’s a very small space. The compartment is even smaller. Only a tiny hand could fit through to grab it—even Izuku’s hand is too big. He always used Pull to yank it out after shoving it back in. Who else could have…

There’s a moment of clarity that takes an eternity for Izuku to believe

is real.

The only real explanation for this is that Midoriya Izuku is an idiot who wants so badly for people to turn out better than they are.

Of course, there is only one logical suspect.

A tiny, furry body can easily scuttle through these parts of the vents. A small hand could so easily be a small paw. And any mammal with a nose would be able to smell Izuku's scent on the notebook and be able to locate it.

Izuku's been holding that notebook a lot these past days as a keepsake and as a comfort, so of course it would smell like him.

And plus, there's only one being who would dare take his shit like that.

Izuku is out of the vents in mere seconds, skin feeling weirdly cold. His quirks swirl and buzz right inside his flesh, begging and screaming to be let out. He walks—no, *stalks* through the halls, trying to rationalize this. Trying to think past the rapidly growing fury in his stomach.

Surely he's wrong. Surely there is a good explanation for this.

Surely Izuku is overreacting.

The boy thinks of all those chess games, of all the wise words the mammal would impart on him in times of silent turmoil. He remembers the niceties, the tea, the encouragement, the care.

And worst of all, the trust.

At least Izuku could always count on Principal Nezu to be the unbiased one in any argument. He never favored Izuku or hated him, really. He took an interest in Izuku's backstory and power, and Izuku knew that. He only never minded it much because he never made Izuku feel the way that the old doctor did.

Nezu was just there, and he was scary at times, sure, But Izuku liked it that way.

But now? Now Izuku can see all the pieces forming. Now all of his games make sense. All of the side glances Nezu gave him, all of the small gestures—they all were pointing to one thing. But Izuku didn't

want to admit it.

At least, he didn't think it would happen so soon. He thought he had some time left before it would occur.

Those beady eyes and clasped paws and flicking tail were never meant to be trusted.

"Ya know," Izuku drawls one morning, sprawled across his new laboratory desk, "I feel like you really get me, sir."

Principal Nezu continues typing away on his computer in the main office. Izuku can't see him, but his quirk is there all the same, and his voice is as soft as always. "I'm pleased you think so. You and I, we must stick together, Midoriya."

Izuku gives a halfhearted salute and picks up his newest set of schematics. As long as he can hang here forever, he doesn't much care what Nezu does.

He appreciates this freedom more than anything.

The boy bites the inside of his cheeks so hard he can feel the soft skin tearing. He makes it to his office in record time, now teetering on the edge of a precipice. The door slides open before he can even put his hand on the sensor, not that he would've bothered with that. He was planning on kicking it in.

Nezu was expecting him, evidently. Hell, he was probably watching him the entire time. This thought makes Izuku feel even better in his advances.

"Ah, Midoriya! Right on time," Principal Nezu says from his large chair. "Please, have a seat. We have much to—"

Izuku is in front of the desk before he can finish. "Where is it?" He demands.

Nezu isn't looking at him. He's talking to him, gesticulating with polished claws, but not looking. Why isn't he looking? He's organizing folders with the back of his chair facing Izuku, and every few words or so he'll glance out the dark windows, his tail swishing and chair rolling.

And. He's. Not. Looking.

"I haven't any idea what you're talking about. Now, if you don't mind,

we should discuss our next—"

"Don't bullshit me!" Izuku shouts, hands coming down hard against the mahogany wood of Nezu's desk. Cracks form like spider webs. "Where is it! *Where* did you *take it!"*

Nezu continues to move around behind his desk. He's scooting in his chair, paws busy. He even grabs a cup of steaming tea from his side table and takes a quick sip.

The blatant ignorance makes Izuku wonder suddenly if he's even here right now. What is so fucking important that Nezu can't even pay him any attention? What paperwork does he have to file that his own AI can't do for him?

"Please lower your volume, Mr. Midoriya. You and I both know it's quite rude to yell inside. As I was saying…"

And the mammal continues talking. He continues doing his thing as if Izuku's world isn't currently splitting apart at the seams. He continues as if Izuku is the one who's being dramatic and petty.

It quickly becomes too much: the whistling in Izuku's ear, the chilliness pressing against his skin, the principal's tinny words, the weight of what this could mean for Izuku.

The sudden, heavy anger in the air doesn't belong to Nezu. It doesn't belong to anyone else.

It's all Izuku's.

He feels the irritation rise and rise in a crescendo as the scents and sounds and thoughts hit him all at once.

Why is Nezu acting like this? Why doesn't he seem to care about Izuku's plans? His intentions? He must know Izuku has reasons, so why can't he just leave Izuku alone? Why can't he just fucking *stop*.

"Look at me!" Like a rubber band, Izuku snaps. The demand is ferocious. The force of the words damn near rattles the earth.

Principal Nezu finally, finally pauses, and he looks at him. "Oh," is all he says, a puff of air.

It's so condescending that Izuku doesn't need anything else to push him into the roaring waters. He's already been drowning for hours. He

clears the large desk in one go, and in half a second he's towering over the pro hero, his fingers itching and hands aching to touch, to hurt, to wrap around something and feel a declining pulse.

But Nezu isn't afraid. His eyes are wide, not out of fear but of jubilation. It's like he's excited at this event finally playing out.

He still has that cup of tea in his hand, and his white tail is swishing even faster. He's in observation mode now.

Izuku slaps the tea cup, sending it shattering against the wall. He kicks Nezu's chair back, and the mammal spins away unharmed. When he slows to a stop, he has his elbow on the armchair and his paw propping up his chin, his eyes narrowed. Everything about his expression screams amusement as he smiles and watches Izuku tear apart his neat office.

The drawers of the desk come out first. And then Izuku is ripping out all of the files in Nezu's cabinet, throwing all of the papers behind him. He goes for the bookshelves then, using a mixture of all his quirks to get every single damned book out so he can search properly.

Every 'hidden' compartment Izuku sees, he opens. He tears off the couch cushions and rips up the carpets, barely breathing the more desperate he becomes. The side rooms are his next victims. He takes hold of the control panel and quickly rifles through each area, shaking so badly that he can barely hold onto anything correctly.

And when Izuku stands in the middle of the ruined office, panting, his chest heaving with unadulterated fear, he hears him.

"Midoriya," Nezu begins, sounding as if he's mentioning the weather outside. "That beautiful quirk you used to hold up that crane last night. Did you take that one from someone as well?"

The world narrows down to just Izuku and his principal. He can't tell anymore where his body ends and the universe begins. He is so strangely aware of everything around him right now that there is no possible way he is anything *but* everything in this room.

Izuku's throat is dry. He doesn't speak, but then he registers the 'as well' part and his body jerks.

"What?" he tries to say, but the word is barely finished.

"Well, like how you took your mother's," Nezu explains, as if making

it easier for him.

Izuku turns, *oh* so slowly, and stares. Nezu doesn't break away from his gaze. And right here, right now, there are no arguments going on inside of Izuku's head. There are no vestiges giving him advice or commenting on his actions or pleading with him to see reason.

The only voice Izuku hears now belongs to himself. And that's just as scary.

"Mommy, get up, get up! Mommy! I have it! I have it!"

"What, baby?" She mumbles, voice thick with sleep and confusion.

"I have it! It came in!" Izuku squeals in excitement. "I've got it!"

She jumps up then, eyes fixed in horror. "What? What happened!" She's off the bed in seconds, kneeling down to grip his small shoulders with worry. "Are you alright? Izuku, baby—!"

He giggles. "I feel 'em! All the powers! I can feel you! And—and Mahono above us! Oh, and the family way, way below! Takeo is there! I s-sense him. Their quirks are so cool, mommy! I can—"

"Slow down, Izuku. Are you sure your quirk came in? Are you not just—"

"No, no, no! I'm sure! I'm really, really sure!" He bounces up and down on his toes, gleeful. "I know it!"

She doesn't say anything for a long moment, but she must come to some conclusion, as eventually she smiles and says with great relief, "Oh, happy birthday, 'zuku."

Truthfully, they had no way of knowing what would happen next. But that doesn't change the fact that he did it. It doesn't change the way he hurt Midoriya Inko beyond repair.

She schedules an appointment for a quirk analysis and registration for the next day, but on his birthday they celebrate quietly and humbly. It's the best thing ever, getting your quirk on the day of your fourth birthday. Izuku couldn't be happier. He is so excited that he's vibrating slightly. He's never felt quite like this before. When he woke up, he was itchy all over. His palms were tingling, and he knew right then, even before he made sense of all the extra things he could feel, that it had happened.

His excitement only built as the day went on and he practiced with

extending his senses as far as he could.

And that night, when his mother brings out the gift she saved up to buy him —a brand new special edition All Might plushie that's about the same size as him—everything changes.

He screams in delight and jumps off his chair to hug her, delight etched in every freckle on his face. He just loves her so much, and he's so, so happy and so energetic that he doesn't know what to do to stop himself from becoming overwhelmed. So, when his mother pulls him up to sit on her lap for a hug, and his palms touch her skin, both of their worlds burn.

And all the while, a tiny version of All Might watches.

Izuku swallows back the unwanted memories. They were shoved so far back in his mind that he thought, naively, he would never have to relive them again. "It was an accident," he finds himself saying aloud, but it's small and childish.

"Of course it was," Nezu soothes.

A familiar voice suddenly sounds from some ways behind the office door, and Izuku shrinks in on himself even more when he recognizes Aizawa's quirk signature.

The man must finally be back from his mission. Does he know what's happening here? No. He wouldn't be walking so casually if so.

The door attempts to slide open to give Aizawa access, but Izuku quickly kicks the entirety of the mahogany desk across the room. It lands with such speed and force that it wedges itself snugly in the doorway, stopping anyone from entering.

Izuku's senses are dialed up to the max. There's a freight train in his ear, and the world is closing in on him. He's dizzy, and though he's trying to breathe he finds that air just won't come to him. Like a cornered animal, Izuku lashes out and continues to tear up everything he gets his eyes on.

It has to be here somewhere. It has to be! Where would Nezu put it? This isn't fair. This isn't fucking *fair*.

The desk groans as it's pushed, and there's alarmed shouting coming from the other side. Izuku can't make sense of any of it, because Nezu is still there in the middle of it with that same small smile.

And Izuku's anger boils over like a pot kept on the stove for too long.

He kicks the coffee table and the couch against the doorway next, buying himself more time. He stalks up to the principal and grabs his tie. "Where did you put it?" He asks once more. He repeats it, again and again, and his grip gets tighter and tighter as Nezu refuses to respond. He never responds. He never looks, and he never speaks.

The fire grows brighter and more furious inside Izuku, making the boy shake and his vision sway.

All Izuku sees are those cold eyes and that knowing, triumphant expression. It's a look that Father was always abundant with.

His patience nonexistent, Izuku lifts Nezu right up off the chair, his blinding panic carving the way for a ferocious need to fix this, to contain the situation, to maintain control. But Izuku has no control to begin with, and he's far too late to keep things from spiraling, so he figures he should find out the consequences of his actions right now.

"Who are you gonna tell?" He asks, and it's more of a threat. He's holding the principal up so close to him that he can smell the vanilla scented lotion on his sleek fur.

Nezu's eyes are beady, and the euphoria on his face remains clear despite his predicament. "My young student, I wouldn't dream of telling any less than everyone."

Izuku's breath shudders, though he already knew that would be the answer. "You'll ruin everything." His voice wobbles dangerously. "You'll ruin *me."*

The mammal only tips his head at the vulnerable admission, now condescendingly confused. "In the large scope of things, does that matter? You were never destined to have a choice in this part, were you? You could not live a good life if you tried."

Izuku drops him back in his chair, unable to help it when his world tips. He's on his knees then, fisting his pants as he tries to blink away the spots in his vision. He touches his throat, coughing up spots of blood.

His heart stutters.

The principal's paw reaches forward carefully and rests on the scar on Izuku's jaw; the touch would be almost loving coming from anyone

else. Izuku is too numb to bat it away or stop it—he lets it happen like how a sickly tree eventually succumbs to a typhoon's great force.

Nezu inspects Izuku for a moment more, his gaze running along every square inch of the boy's face and lingering on his cuts. Izuku feels something hard coil in his gut then, and the storm outside grows louder and louder until it's all consuming. Until he can feel the vibrations in his teeth.

Does Nezu feel it too?

"Sir," Izuku begins, and it's barely more than a cracked whisper, "do you know what I've been wondering?"

He waits for Nezu's imploring nod, just as he's done for their entire time working together, and lifts his head. He maintains eye contact despite the way his face burns and burns and burns.

His voice is the quietest it's ever been. "If I ripped that quirk from you, would it reduce you back to that dumb fucking rodent you were before?"

Nezu's ears flatten, and he doesn't say a word.

Izuku thinks then that silence has never felt so rewarding.

Chapter End Notes

> nezu mistakenly thought that abused animals would stick together. he had studied humans and thought, naively, that the therapy and comfort and love he observed meant that a connection would form when there is hurt. he did not realize that many abused animals will attack each other rather than group together. this is a survival response.
>
> this is the only thing I was listening to while writing the first and last scene :) https://youtu.be/1lB7Xjuw0hs
>
> we hit 700k words! and 900k hits!
>
> h

futile devices

Chapter Notes

chapter 80 milestone

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku rises to his feet at the same time that lightning strikes somewhere down the block. His ear twitches, and his enhancements allow him to hear the way the tree cracks and falls to the ground.

Show them.

His hand moves to his face, and he feels blood dripping steadily down his nose. All he smells is copper and regret and disappointment.

The voice is back, and it's calling his name. It becomes so loud that it drowns out everything else. It drowns out the sound of Nezu's soft words, it drowns out Aizawa's yelling behind the doorway, it drowns out the storm.

And Izuku is just so sick and tired of being treated like a toy, like an anomaly to figure out and fix and contain.

He watches Nezu's mouth, but he doesn't care much for what he has to say anyway.

That voice is there. His *father* is there. Egging him on, pushing him, shoving him towards the shore so he can escape the roaring waters.

He calls his name, and then Izuku is not there. He's in front of that dreadful realm, in front of the almost heavenly veil separating him from his origin. And Izuku only stares through. There's something moving in the darkness, and he knows it's him.

He sees white hair through the haze, and he panics—but it's not his father. It's Izuku's vestige.

No, no. His *One for All* vestige.

And he's inside of his father's domain like he belonged there in the first place.

Izuku reaches a hand in, but his vestige is just as quick to blast him away with a flick of a finger, and debris crashes against his back, except it feels too real, and wooden splinters imbed in his skin a little too sharply—

He's snapped back to the present, and Nezu is in his hands once again, still as unperturbed as ever despite nearly being strangled. Sadness and genuine confusion shine in those black eyes like stars in the sky, and Izuku drops him in alarm as his quirks fizzle away.

Izuku turns, his entire body burning like static, and he meets Aizawa's shocked gaze through the wreckage of the office.

His teacher says something, shouts it, but it's delayed when it registers in Izuku's mind. The man takes a step forward, hand reaching out to him, but Izuku sees the way his other hand is gripping his scarf, ready to send it out—and the boy doesn't wait and see what mercy Aizawa will show him. He kicks the remnants of the splintered desk and couch away from his body and prepares to go straight through Aizawa.

He doesn't have time anymore to stand and search. It doesn't matter now; Nezu found his notebook, he has it hidden somewhere, and it's obvious he's already read the important things in it. Izuku has it all in a semasiographic code he created with Kacchan back when they were both younger, one that is based solely on actions and emotional movement. It is nearly impossible to be directly translated to a phonetic language, and not just because of Izuku's own mistakes and inconsistencies due to his previous circumstances. This is also *Nezu* he's talking about.

Why did he ever think it would take the principal days to figure it out? He did it in an hour tops, if Izuku's thinking is right. He did it so fast that Izuku wants to rip out his fucking hair and scream at how naive he was, how stupidly confident he was to think his notebook would be safe from the one being he *never* trusted with his secrets.

The chances are that Nezu already has everything copied down somewhere, so even if Izuku manages to find it, the damage is permanent. It isn't done, though, no. It will only get worse, because the only thing for Izuku to do now is see what Nezu will do next—see who Nezu will tell.

Or won't tell, as that list will assuredly be much shorter.

He only mentioned Extract and Mom. He didn't say anything about All for One or—or my brother. But I didn't exactly give him a chance! There's no

way he doesn't know. If he knows about Mom, he knows about him! He's gonna tell All Might. He's gonna—I'm gonna—!

Anything that Izuku does right now is pointless. He signed his death certificate a while ago, the very day he stole Pull, and Nezu is only waving it in his face and reminding him of the debt he's yet to pay.

And if Izuku is taken, if he's restrained or locked up or even killed, who is going to fight against All for One? How is Izuku going to pay for all of the shit he's done? If they want to get rid of Izuku after he's finished his duty, so be it, the boy will be relieved, but he's not *done* yet.

Izuku has no other choice but to get out of here.

He doesn't want to hurt Aizawa. He hates himself for raising a hand against him after spending an entire year building up a pretty okay, albeit rocky, relationship with the pro hero, but he can't take any more risks. What little luck he had before has been flushed down the drain.

And so disappointingly fast.

Aizawa must see the determined look on his student's face, because his shocked expression goes from stunned to panicked to steely in less than a second.

Gray coils rise up and shoot toward Izuku, but Izuku's seen this scene before. He's experienced this hundreds of times, both in real life and in his worst nightmares.

Just how many times has Izuku imagined the truth coming out like this?

He jumps off the wall and twists in midair, grabbing both ends of the scarf attempting to wrap around him. He jerks them inwards in a cross and twirls with his head tucked to his chest for maximum propulsion as he shoots forward. The capture weapon responds to his sharp movements and shoots behind him like a ribbon, decreasing the amount that Aizawa can use for a split second. It's like a fish taking most of the line of a fishing pole by dragging it along under the water.

Izuku grabs the scarf again at the slightest hint of losing speed and uses it to yank himself forward so he's right in front of Aizawa. The fabric left behind him is turning now, ready to capture him from the

back, but Izuku tightens his grip and uses the weapon to force Aizawa into a bow.

Releasing the dangerous piece of equipment, Izuku uses Aizawa's back to spring straight out of the office and through the ruined doorway.

The entire exchange happened in less than a second, but Aizawa isn't an S-rank pro hero for nothing.

Izuku hasn't even hit the ground yet before a hard wire wraps around his wrist and ankle, binding both appendages together behind him painfully with a magnetic buzz. It cuts into his skin, making him grit his teeth. He rolls towards the closest wall and positions himself against it so he can kick out at the perfect angle, snapping the reinforced wire in half to free himself.

But the few seconds he took to do so were enough for Aizawa to wrap him up properly using the capture weapon. Izuku is jerked upright and slammed into the wall, but not face first.

Izuku can see what's happening because of that, and that's Aizawa's mistake. His teacher definitely knows the risks, he just probably doesn't expect Izuku to do what he does next.

Aizawa stalks up to Izuku, looking the scariest he's ever been. A red glow permeates through the air around him, and his hair, which is half up in a greasy bun as a product of his latest mission, floats above his shoulders. A potent mixture of anger and bewilderment suffocates Izuku as Aizawa meets him face-to-face. "What the *hell* was that?"

The words bounce off the walls with the sheer intensity behind them, and Izuku knows it's not rhetorical, knows that Aizawa is expecting—demanding—an answer, especially since the man didn't cover Izuku's mouth when capturing him, but that's not Izuku's problem right now.

What is he supposed to say? *Sorry, sensei, I'm currently being outed as the son of a centuries old supervillain, which means I've been lying to you all for two years! Oops! Silly me! So, if you'll excuse me, I have to go back into hiding and start over like I'm eleven again!*

No.

So, Izuku's only response is a bloody spit to Aizawa's face.

It's disgusting, biologically dangerous, and probably the most disrespectful thing someone can do to another person, but Izuku didn't

do it for kicks. His spit lands exactly where he planned—in Aizawa's unprotected eyes.

And later, after all of this is over, Izuku will realize that the emotion he's experiencing right now is unadulterated guilt, as the only reason this move worked is because Aizawa never thought Izuku would stoop so low with him.

If Aizawa had wrapped him up like a regular villain, this never would've worked. Izuku would be unconscious.

But as it stands, Aizawa hisses and jerks back, arm coming up to wipe off the mess.

Izuku's quirks return to him for a period so short that it doesn't even quantify as a stretch of time, but Izuku is used to surviving in the space between visible seconds, so it's more than enough for him to react.

One for All licks up his body without needing to be asked, and Izuku forces his arms out of the confines of the capture weapon, not wasting a moment before pulling one of the floating ends towards him. He unravels himself halfway and bursts the rest of the way out, and by that time Erasure is activated once more—not that Izuku wasn't expecting it.

He barrels against Aizawa and wraps a piece of the scarf around the man's face, trying to obscure his vision once more. Izuku is sufficient in using and controlling the weapon, but he's still not nearly as experienced as his teacher, so the outcome of a battle between the two of them based around it will always be in Aizawa's favor.

Aizawa manages to restrain most of Izuku's motions again by encasing his torso tightly. Izuku gasps when the breath is squeezed right out of him, and he thrashes around for a hold of some sort, hoping he can change the direction of the other floating tendrils.

The hero grabs his forearm, avoiding a nasty jab to the throat in the process, but he's too close to his student's face. Izuku bites him hard enough to draw blood even through the sleeve, and Aizawa's grip loosens just a fraction, probably more out of disbelief and shock than pain, however, and Izuku is able to grab a nearby stretch of gray fabric.

He wrenches it with deft fingers, brows drawn in concentration, and the rest of the capture weapon tightens painfully around Aizawa's

neck.

The man chokes and claws at it, subconsciously moving Izuku closer to the ground with his movements. He guesses Izuku's next action but fails to grab him in time as Izuku maneuvers out of his reach and finally falls free. The scarf goes slack around the man's throat the moment Izuku's touch is gone, just as Izuku knew it would. He wouldn't have attempted it if there was even a small possibility Aizawa couldn't get free.

Izuku turns the corner of the hallway, relishing in the feeling of his quirks coming back once out of Aizawa's direct line of sight. He's running so fast with One for All biting at his ankles that he runs right into Ectoplasm. Except the hero goes up in a cloud of smoke and debris, telling Izuku that it was just a clone.

He stumbles, chest heaving as another clone rounds on him. He kicks straight through it without pause, dread making a home in his stomach. Where is the real Ectoplasm? Izuku feels him somewhere in the building. Does he know what's going on? Is that why his clones are patrolling right now?

Fuck. If Ectoplasm knows, the other teachers do too, meaning Izuku has to fight his way through them as well if he's not quick about this.

Izuku pivots, about to shoot through the reinforced windows using forty percent of One for All (potential broken bones be damned) when his quirks zip away from him again, making him trip. Fabric folds around his legs, and Izuku wants to bang his head against the floor in frustration.

"What is wrong with you?" Aizawa shouts, and he's stomping forward, reeling him in. "Stop fighting me, dammit! Kid, *stop it!"*

Izuku's body aches to listen. He wants to, he needs to, but he can't. He can't stop now. This is life or death, literally, and there's no way Aizawa will understand it, not even if Izuku explains himself. So Izuku won't bother trying to.

"Let go and I won't *have* to fight you!" He snaps instead, flipping so he's being dragged on his back.

He takes a moment to think about the situation at hand. He can't run away without interception if he doesn't have his quirks. Without One for All's power, Izuku won't be fast enough to escape. Aizawa has a clear view of him in this large hallway, so there's a zero percent

chance Izuku will be able to leave his view again. Plus, Aizawa has long-ranged capabilities too due to his capture weapon.

So Izuku can't jump into vents or hide anywhere like that. He'd be caught before he'd even get half way up.

The windows are a no go as well now, saying as his quirks are erased. If he can get just one moment with One for All, he may be able to do it, but even then that chance is slim! If he makes it through, he'll fall all the way down and surely break something and become immobilized if his quirks are erased midway.

So what can he do now? There's only one other option, and it's the one he dreads the most. He's fought alongside Eraserhead so many times now that the answer, his next course of action, is quite obvious.

"I need you to promise me something," Aizawa tells him, staring down at Izuku with half-lidded eyes as he holds a smoothie high above the boy's head.

"I don't make promises," Izuku says indifferently, jumping up to try and reach the beverage. "That's not my thing, Eraser."

His declaration is promptly ignored. "If you're in trouble and I can't get to you, you need to run, Rabbit. You need to turn around and get as far away from the situation as possible, no matter what." He easily pushes away Izuku's attempts at getting the smoothie with his hand. "What you did tonight was unacceptable. You knew you couldn't handle that criminal by yourself, but instead of fleeing, you put yourself directly into the line of fire. What if I hadn't arrived in time?"

Izuku rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, pouting beneath the mask. "I knew you were coming, though. I had everything under control." His expression contorts into one of annoyance. "And you know that running isn't always possible, right? I know what I'm doing!"

"If you can't run immediately, you should direct your focus on the thing that's holding you back from leaving," Aizawa instructs, voice sharp. "If you absolutely cannot go without a fight, do only what you must in order to escape. Go for the biggest threat that's stopping you, and once you take care of that, you'll be able to flee. That's all I'm asking of you. It's not much."

"But what about the civilians? What if there's no one protecting them?"

Aizawa glares. "You are a civilian," he reminds pointedly, "so you should

put yourself first. It's the safest thing to do. Now, quit arguing and answer me. Can you do that for me or not?"

Izuku scrunches his nose. "Something tells me you're not asking."

At this, Aizawa allows Izuku to grab the smoothie. "Because I'm not."

Excited by the chance to have his smoothie but also feeling down because of the scolding, Izuku sighs dramatically and waves a hand in the air. "Fine, yeah, I can do it. I promise, or whatever, old man."

He can at least take out the biggest threat. Aizawa said it's the safest thing to do, so Izuku guesses he'll listen for now. He can do that, sure.

He can do it.

With these words at the forefront of his mind, Izuku sits up and shucks off a shoe, grabbing the hilt of the knife he's gone back to keeping there ever since Stain's return.

In the same motion, he uses the knife to slice the most taut part of the scarf wrapped around his ankles, and it cuts through in one easy swipe. Izuku twists, biting at his inner cheeks to calm his racing heart, and goes straight for Aizawa's eyes.

Before, his goal was only to get Aizawa to blink, but now his goal is to immobilize his teacher completely to get rid of the uncontrolled variable that is Erasure. Even if that means knocking Aizawa the fuck out. If that's even possible, of course. Izuku has never succeeded in doing that before.

He's been presented the opportunity a couple of rare times, but these were only recently—when Aizawa had no reason to distrust Izuku enough to expect an attack like that. So it's safe to say that at this very moment, that chance will be nonexistent.

Izuku is launching at him before the man can even fully open his mouth to begin his next words. The knife wielded in his hands is the first thing to go as a result of Aizawa's elbow knocking it away. The blade wedges into the window off to the side, creating spidery cracks reaching the floor and ceiling—the force it must have exerted to do that is telling of Aizawa's sheer prowess.

Aizawa redirects Izuku's next heavy blow and weaves to the side, attempting to shove Izuku off balance. Izuku leaps over the quick sweep of his teacher's leg and kicks him in the chest, preparing to

follow it up with a second foot to the temple. The scarf bands together to form a barrier at the last moment, and when Izuku leaps back, an opening is created.

The severed end rears back and shoots toward Izuku's face, but he has been subjected to this move so many times by even Banjou's whips that the attempt is quite futile. Izuku grabs it before it can touch his skin and twists his body so the scarf loops tightly around his torso, giving him the upper hand. Now that he has weight and momentum on his side, Izuku has more control over it.

In the next split second, he's crashing against Aizawa once the man attempts to gain back his control. As a result, Izuku's arms become stuck in the fabric around his torso. He brings Aizawa to the ground before he can fix his footing, but Aizawa is quick to flip them over so he's on top. Large hands grab onto Izuku's shoulders, and the boy can't help the cry that escapes his mouth when fingers dig into the sore area of his bad side, right where the dinosaur tore into him yesterday. The pain that was a mere dull burn before suddenly triples, crackling like an electric wire down his nervous system.

Izuku's arm manages to break free from the capture weapon, allowing him to land a solid hit to the side of Aizawa's face. He tries to hit Aizawa again, but his teacher grasps his wrist and slams it down onto the floor beside Izuku's head with a sharp *crack!*

The distraction was enough, though, as Izuku is then able to pull on the middle piece connecting them together and loosen the remaining coils, starting with the ones on Aizawa's neck. A chain reaction begins, and it frees Izuku's legs. He knocks Aizawa off of him with a quick swipe and rushes him before the momentum has even stopped, aiming to overwhelm his teacher.

Aizawa is more skilled and has a clear advantage with his experience and quirk, but Izuku's physical body has strengthened due to years of using his enhancement quirk. So, even without his powers, he is something of a superhuman. The only way to get Aizawa down for the count in this instance is to not allow him any time to react or recuperate from any of Izuku's attacks.

Izuku is stronger but smaller, so he has to be careful.

He swiftly snatches Aizawa's large knife from his belt, and he slices the air before him, aiming first for the hands gripping that scarf, but his teacher is already putting yards between them. Izuku doesn't let

up; he shoots forward like a burning star, determination setting his bones on fire.

And there's a moment of clear silence somewhere in the chaos. The earth quiets down, and Aizawa meets his gaze accidentally as Izuku crosses the distance. His obsidian eyes are wide, and something like dismay bleeds into the thick air. The teacher hunches over defensively, lips parting as he grits his teeth and prepares for the worst.

Izuku twists into a corkscrew, slicing off another chunk of the capture weapon shooting towards him. He does the same with Aizawa's next attempt, and then he's upon him.

Aizawa brings his arms to his face to stop Izuku's steel-toed boot from hitting his eyes, and the boy uses it as a new platform to boost himself a little higher. A wild tendril snatches the stolen knife out of Izuku's grip, but Izuku's not worried about that, as he'll get it back in a second. He flips forward and grabs onto Aizawa's floating hair, yanking himself down so he's wrapped around his teacher like a goddamn tree. He presses the gray fabric he sliced off the scarf against the sockets of Aizawa's eyes, looping it around his head and tying it so hard that Izuku is sure the rough fabric is scratching against the man's sensitive corneas and sclerae.

This thought is proven when Izuku's quirks return to him with what Izuku can only describe as a sigh of relief.

He holds the blindfold to prevent Aizawa from ripping it off, and it's difficult. He climbs higher, and his thighs are now wrapped around Aizawa's throat, squeezing as hard as they can. Using Pull, he snatches back Aizawa's knife and holds the blade between shaking fingers. He rears up and slams the hilt of it down, again and again, against the top of his mentor's head.

He needs to make him fall unconscious, and fast. Why isn't it working? Come on, *come one!*

If the blunt force trauma won't knock him out, Izuku is hoping the lack of oxygen will. But with the way Aizawa is pushing against Izuku's legs, managing to gasp in breaths every few moments and allowing blood to flow, Izuku guesses that probably won't work as swiftly as he likes.

The boy brings it down once more with a grunt, and the hilt snaps right off. Izuku glances up and eyes the cracked window, making up

his mind very quickly when he throws the leftover blade right at it using thirty percent of One for All. The knife hits exactly where Izuku wanted it to, and the reinforced window shatters outwards, granting the storm entrance.

Heavy rain splashes the edge of the floor, quickly creating puddles. Wind bellows through, and Izuku sees his chance.

Aizawa slips, and then he's on his knees, and Izuku tries to get off, tries to *run,* but he can't.

He blinks in surprise, and he attempts to leap off of Aizawa once more, but—

The man isn't pushing against him anymore or trying to throw him off. Instead, he's holding onto Izuku's legs, fingers digging into his thighs, and he won't let go.

He knows exactly what Izuku is going to do.

Izuku lets out a noiseless gasp, sudden *terror* snaking down his spine, and he tries to yank Aizawa's grip off, but *he's not budging.*

Extract hisses at him in warning, and Izuku's head snaps up, looking in the direction of the hallway entrance some hundred feet away. New quirks have entered this part of the building, and Izuku suddenly feels so, so small.

"Fuck," he whispers, his entire world crumbling around him, and Aizawa does something Izuku would never expect from him—he chokes on a laugh.

It's dry, sharp, and entirely humorless, but it's a laugh all the same. It's not meant to be cruel or conniving, Izuku knows, deep down, but he can't help the thoughts that take over. Because the voice was right before. They *are* laughing at him.

Everyone is. Aizawa is laughing right now as clear proof.

He's *laughing.* Like this is a joke. Like Izuku isn't about to be outed in the worst way possible.

But what if they knew? What if, right now, Aizawa knew?

Izuku wonders if he'd be laughing then.

His desperation and leftover frustration gives way to anger, and Izuku

is about to just use his elbow and One for All to knock Aizawa out the hard way when the pro hero's arm shoots up and back, grabbing Izuku's throat.

Izuku jerks, scrabbling at the large hand holding him tight. He's a tiny, regretful mouse caught in a cheese trap.

With one hand, Izuku holds onto the blindfold, and with the other he latches onto Aizawa's wrist, trying to pry him off with as much strength as he can muster. Except One for All won't come to him now, as black spots are dancing in the corners of Izuku's vision, and, God, he can't breathe or think.

His vision swims, and not just because of the living thunderstorm raging beside them.

Izuku squeezes his thighs hard, trying to get Aizawa to pass out first, but then he feels the capture weapon wrapping around him, about to loosen Izuku's own grip on him, and the boy doesn't want to lose this. He can't afford to.

Just then, Aizawa flings his other arm back and grabs a fistful of Izuku's hair before the boy can even attempt to move away—not that he would've been able to with the way he's being held by the throat. Aizawa yanks, and Izuku cries out when he's nearly thrown to the floor before Aizawa. Another yank, and Izuku has to give up holding the blindfold to stop him from dragging him off. The blindfold is torn off immediately, and now Aizawa's eyes are unobstructed. Izuku is screwed. He can't keep going back and forth like this. God, please, he just needs some help. He needs to keep Erasure off the *fucking table*—

The first black tendril shoots out of Izuku's back, and the second and third follow immediately after. They whirl around and press against Aizawa's face, replacing the fallen blindfold. Izuku focuses on the feeling of the concentrated energy, shocked that he was even able to make them appear. Black Whip curls around Aizawa's hand, the one holding his throat, and wrenches it off, snapping it as it does so.

Izuku's mind screams at him at that exact moment, and he is forced to let the appendage go as crimson blood arcs through the air and shoots toward him.

Vlad King has arrived.

And much too fast for Izuku's liking.

He sends an air shot on instinct, but Vlad quickly dodges it and rushes at him. He's fast, and he crosses the large distance between them in just a few short seconds. Izuku panics, still recovering from being choked. He sends Black Whip forward to intercept him, but he isn't in his right mind. And he's truthfully exhausted, so the whips are not strong enough to withstand the clash of Vlad's hardened blood. His tendrils burn out like they were shocked, and they fall away, leaving Aizawa's eyes unblocked.

A stupid, reckless idea formulates in Izuku's mind, and he knows he shouldn't, knows he would curse himself for ever thinking this at any other point in his life, but he has no other option. Aizawa's eyes are open, and he's currently looking directly at Vlad.

So, Izuku sees the best opportunity he'll ever get.

He holds Aizawa's head still as best he can and activates Force in a moment of blind, raw desperation.

Vlad's quirk falls away just as his arcs are about to reach him, and his blood liquefies again to spray against the floor before Izuku. His own powers disappear too, though it's a worthy sacrifice, as now Izuku is finally able to jump off of Aizawa, who goes limp momentarily from the effects of Force. The man sinks to the floor, seizing for a brief second, and Izuku feels a stab of pain in his chest upon hearing the sound of his teacher's sudden painful shout, but he can't linger for long.

The blood hero's eyes bug out of his head at the sight, and his quirk returns when Aizawa squeezes his eyes shut, no doubt. "You little *parasite—!"*

Izuku is already leaping out of the broken window, icy droplets cutting into his skin, but before he can fully escape, concrete ripples around him and encases his foot, freezing him in place.

Cementoss.

No, no, no. He can't move. The concrete is moving up his leg! If it goes over his arms, he won't be able to get out of it.

Izuku looks down, as he's still hanging over the edge, and briefly makes eye contact with the cement hero far down below, who has his blocky hands pressed against UA's outer wall. Izuku shudders at the intense expression on the man's face, wondering how he knew Izuku would be doing this.

Making a run for it outside suddenly seems a lot more laughable.

Izuku's lungs constrict at the dawning realization that his options are running out. The cement carries him back inside the building, creeping more up his thighs, and Izuku blasts it off him with a superpowered punch. His mind blares, and he turns just in time to see Vlad coming at him once more.

Deflect saves Izuku in the nick of time. The boy stumbles back, breaths coming out ragged as the hallway gets smaller. The tiles are no longer clean, and the storm is only getting louder.

Vlad King strikes once, twice, and then a third time against the invisible barrier, and Izuku swears he feels the shield crack, which shouldn't be possible anymore.

He's boxed in, and there's no way he can fight his way out now.

Izuku whips around, looking for another viable exit, only for Snipe to emerge from around the corner a little ways ahead, his gloved hands already lifting placatingly at the sight of the panicking student.

"Woah, there, son," he calls, walking closer cautiously. "Let's take a breather, alrighty?"

No, Izuku thinks, but can't say. *I can't do this. Please, please, God. Let me go. I'm begging. Just forget about me.*

He shakes his head instead, his skin prickling as red and black sparks war together across his body, causing his hair to move away from his face and frame his scarred jaw. "I—I can't—"

Izuku jumps out of the way of Vlad's next strike, and Black Whip shoves the man back, now surrounding Izuku as a warning of some sort.

Snipe doesn't stop his approach. He lifts off his mask and hat, revealing a calm expression and wet dreads—no doubt from the storm outside. Izuku wonders fleetingly what Nezu must've told everyone to get them to rush here so quickly from whatever they were doing on the other side of campus.

"Now, now, cool it," Snipe orders, and he's still walking closer, unperturbed by the dangerous whips coming from Izuku's body. Except the quirk suppressing cuffs hanging from Snipe's belt loops betrays his impassiveness.

Izuku finds himself taking a step back with each step Snipe takes forward, and he can tell just by looking at the cuffs that they've been specially made for people like him and All Might. It's game over once those are on Izuku.

The boy maneuvers around both Vlad and Snipe, eyes never leaving his two teachers. They're at a standstill; Izuku doesn't dare take them both on. Snipe may not be willing to shoot Izuku, at least he wouldn't think so, but he's still extremely versatile with his other skills, and Izuku doesn't want to risk it as of yet.

Vlad jabs a finger in his direction just as more of Ectoplasm's clones reach them, and Izuku thinks with a striking feeling that the real Ectoplasm isn't far behind now.

A straight shot of blood emerges from Vlad's back and heads for Izuku's face, and the boy should've realized it was just to trap him further. He should've known it wasn't actually going to shoot straight through his skull and kill him, but at this very moment, there was no telling for Izuku what would happen.

Black Whip intercepts seemingly on its own accord, and Izuku turns tail to flee in the opposite direction, seeing no other way out—but he should've been paying more attention.

When he turns, he sees a blur of black and gray, and he doesn't even have time to look at Aizawa fully before a bloody fist is cracking against the side of Izuku's face. The blow is reinforced by Aizawa's capture weapon, and it sends Izuku flying sideways. He skids across the wet tile, his vision leaving him for all of four seconds as he lands facedown.

And even the universe shuts up when the hit echoes down the hallway.

The punch takes him by such surprise that Izuku stays on the ground, eyes closed and mouth open as he wheezes. He can't move, he can't breathe, and why can't he feel the left side of his face? He tastes blood in his mouth now, as the force and suddenness of the blow made him nearly bite his tongue in half.

Izuku coughs against the floor and dry heaves, his own anxiety causing him to feel even more nauseous than before.

There are footsteps, and he feels the quirks of his teachers moving closer, so he tries to force himself to his feet but can't quite manage it.

His quirks are once again locked away due to Erasure, so when he lifts himself up onto his elbows, he can do nothing to prevent it when Aizawa presses a knee against his spine and forces him back down easily.

The pro hero is panting above Izuku, pressing his whole weight against his student as the quirk suppressing cuffs are linked together behind his back.

It hurts to the point where Izuku has to focus all of his energy on muffling his cries so as not to be heard, and he drops his head against the hard tile multiple times in frustration.

This can't be happening. Izuku can't be caught like this.

"The fuck's happening here?" Vlad asks from above, using his blood to hold Izuku's legs down when the boy begins to writhe and spit against his captors.

"I don't know!" Aizawa snaps back, struggling now to force Izuku's upper body against the ground. His capture weapon has been damaged pretty badly, so he can't keep relying on it to wrap Izuku up completely—there's just not enough of it left to do so.

Vlad scoffs, incredulous. "What do you mean you don't know? You—"

"I just got back, dammit! Go ask Nezu, for Christ's sake, not me!"

Izuku struggles even harder now, bucking up with as much strength as he can muster, which isn't a lot. His extensive list of injuries from yesterday and the added ones from today are starting to take a toll on him. His wrist is sending sharp waves of pain up his arm, and he can barely move his legs. His shoulder burns more than he'd ever admit, worse than his apartment fire that day, and he *still can't breathe right.*

"Quit it, you little brat!" Aizawa hisses next to his ear, and his tone is almost enough to have Izuku obeying. Almost.

"Get off me!" He shouts, voice cracking painfully while he attempts to roll over to dislodge Aizawa's grip. "Fucking get off! *Please!"*

Aizawa just places a hand on Izuku's neck and presses down. "Stop struggling."

No. Izuku can't. If Vlad is really going to Nezu to ask what's happening, Izuku is even more screwed.

Izuku flexes his fingers, testing how strong the capture weapon and cuffs are at the moment. It doesn't look like it'll budge, which is just another nail in his coffin. God, he would use One for All in his *tongue* right now if he had the ability. He would do anything possible to escape.

"Let's all calm ourselves," Snipe says, and he crouches by Izuku's face, who really does *not* want to look at him.

Blood is spilling from Izuku's nose and the fresh cuts on his cheeks, creating a puddle right where his face is pressed hard into the tile. Each breath brings his blood right back in, and soon he's struggling for a different reason than shame. Snipe says something to Aizawa before lifting Izuku's head up. Izuku's neck strains with the awkward stretch and position, but he's grateful for it all the same.

Suffocating in his own blood doesn't seem too great.

Another familiar quirk joins the fray, and Izuku wants to shrivel up and die.

"What on earth is—oh, Jesus, Shouta!" Kayama-sensei exclaims, shock coloring her tone when she gasps loudly and quickens her pace. Izuku is able to see her purple heels rushing forward to greet them. "Your eyes! You need to go to—!"

"I'm fine," Aizawa says quickly. "Just give me a second. It'll stop."

Kayama kneels beside Snipe, craning her neck to look at Izuku, and her face contorts in shock. She reaches to pull back her sleeve, and Izuku's life quite literally flashes before his eyes. "He's out of it. Let me—"

"No, I've got him! Don't use it yet!" Aizawa pushes Izuku's face back down, this time away from the pile of blood.

Oh, God. She was going to use her quirk, wasn't she? Izuku begins to hyperventilate just at the thought. If he's knocked out, he can't see what's happening. He may wake up someplace far, far away. He may even wake up in a cell, there's no way of knowing.

"Where's Yagi?" He hears Aizawa ask through ragged breaths.

"Still at that conference," Snipe answers. "Do you want me to call him to—"

Izuku jerks up before the hero can even finish the question. “No!” He shouts, and that singular word echoes down the halls. *Don’t you fucking tell him!* He begs inwardly. *Please!*

Aizawa slams him back down, knee painfully digging into his spine. “Shut it!” He warns, and then turns to Snipe when he adds, “I can handle this for now, just tell me when he’s on his way back.”

Kayama rests a hand in Izuku’s matted hair despite the two men’s warnings. “What about Hizashi?”

“They needed him for something else, so he had to stay behind for a few hours,” Aizawa explains, now adjusting his grip on Izuku. “He’s on his way now.”

Izuku honestly can’t think of anything worse. If he had a choice, he would rather both Yamada and Yagi not see him like this. He wouldn’t want them to know what’s happening at all.

He doesn’t even want to know what Yamada will think of him, or what he’ll say. And Yagi? How is he going to react when he finds out what his *successor* has been hiding?

Kayama tugs on a spot on his head, sounding thoughtful despite the situation. “Do you two see this?”

Izuku doesn’t have the willpower to find out what she’s talking about. He’s too busy trying to learn how to breathe again. The world is pressing against him, and it’s squeezing against his chest. He opens his mouth to draw in air but can’t manage anything.

He writhes, his hands twitching in the cuffs’ hold. He doesn’t want this. He just wanted to leave, dammit. Why didn’t he leave before? Izuku had so many chances. He could’ve disappeared long ago. Sure, it would’ve been hard, saying as he’d have the entire UA staff plus Tsukauchi’s department looking for him—not to mention All Might himself—but it would’ve been much better than being stuck here.

“He’s not breathing,” Snipe warns suddenly, and he’s wrenching Izuku up, hand quickly going to check his airway.

“‘Course he’s not, he’s panicking,” Kayama juts in, her voice thick, and she moves her arm close to Izuku’s face. “We have no choice, Shouta.”

With that, she pushes back her sleeve and releases a steady cloud of light pink mist. Izuku immediately shuts his mouth in fear, not

wanting to breathe it, but a swift jab to his gut by Kayama has his mouth opening back up and his lungs screaming for air.

The first desperate inhale, nothing happens. Izuku shakes his head wildly, his shoulders shaking as he begins to plead, to *beg* them not to do this, to ask to be let go just this fucking once, but Kayama doesn't stop her quirk from continuing to spray. She only apologizes to him quietly and catches his head on the second inhale, once Izuku's entire body begins to tingle and his pain lessens to a dull throb. His eyes flutter close, but he can still hear. He can still hear the conversation between his teachers.

"This won't last long," Kayama says, and she's rubbing soothing circles on Izuku's cheek. "He's high strung, so his metabolism will burn through it in twenty minutes unless I keep forcing it."

"We only need twenty minutes," Aizawa grunts, and he's lifting Izuku up.

On the third inhale, the boy is gone.

Kayama was wrong, which doesn't happen often.

She said it would only last twenty minutes, but Aizawa hasn't even fully closed the door to the nurse's wing by the time Izuku awakens.

One hundred and seventy-four seconds. It took one hundred and seventy-four seconds for Izuku's metabolism to shred through the sleeping gas. Even with his bone-numbing exhaustion and high stress levels, even with the injuries sustained from yesterday, Izuku is only asleep for three minutes. It's a record of some sort, but who was ever really counting?

Later, Izuku will be told that Aizawa was counting. And that it's a good thing his teacher had the sense to run to Recovery Girl's office even in the state he was in.

The room Aizawa brings him to isn't one Izuku has been in before. This one is empty except for a bed and small table with old cups on it off to the side, and there are monitors and medical equipment in an adjacent room. It's obvious this is more of an observation room or

common area than a real hospital quarter.

There are no windows in this room. It's a smart move, really, as that's the first thing Izuku looks for when he jerks awake.

His limbs aren't restrained, but he still has the cuffs on, so when he wrenches himself out of Aizawa's arms, he hits the ground hard. Except he miscalculated just how long (or, more appropriately, how short of a time) he was out. For a moment he thought the worst—he thought he was being taken somewhere horrid after being healed to the bare minimum. He thought he wouldn't be hurting physically anymore.

So when he tries to get to his feet, he's surprisingly overcome with white-hot pain. The side of his face is swollen, and his shoulders are back on fire. With all of his muscles tense, Izuku just lies there on the ground, curling up into a fetal position while he wishes he could grasp his pounding head.

He has a raging migraine that's about to split his skull in two. He squeezes his eyes shut again, not enjoying the bright fluorescent lights ahead.

Aizawa's footsteps disappear into the side room, and the lights dim significantly. He comes back just as quickly, and Izuku bites back a yelp when the man grabs onto him and pushes him upright so that his back is against the side of the bed.

Izuku tries to force his eyes open, but everything is blurry. Kayama's sleeping mist is still tugging at him, attempting to pull him back under. But Izuku won't succumb to it this time.

"You really don't do things half-assed, do you?" Aizawa grunts, and he's heading back to the other room. A faucet turns on, and Izuku wonders what he's doing.

He blinks a dozen times, clearing the haze, and he isn't able to swallow back the bile that ejects from the back of his throat. He's thankful a small trash can was placed right next to him (when did Aizawa do that?) so he won't have to make a mess.

Not much time could have passed, Izuku figures, as he's not being taken to Tartarus yet. The storm is still raging outside, and his body physically aches.

After he's thrown up everything in his stomach, Izuku eyes the door. It

looks like it's only locked from the outside, but he better give it a try anyway. He uses the bed as leverage to help himself to his feet, but he hasn't even made it close to the door when Aizawa moves in front of him, shoving him back with a bandaged hand. Except Izuku's arms are still cuffed behind his back, so he has no way to balance himself.

Aizawa grabs the front of his shirt and jerks him forward right before he can fall backwards. And Izuku would be grateful if that didn't mean he now has to look his teacher in the eye and—

Izuku's attention is immediately diverted to the two identical streams dripping down Aizawa's cheeks. They're coming from his eyes, but he's not crying, no. The liquid isn't made from tears.

It's blood.

Izuku had prepared himself for the possibility that he'd hurt his teacher, but somehow seeing the damage right here in front of him hurts worse than anything Izuku imagined.

Aizawa's eyes are bloodshot and puffy, and blood overflows and drips from them like a leaky tap down his bruised face.

That's right. Izuku used Force on him. What he's seeing now are the aftereffects of suddenly overusing Erasure.

In Aizawa's unbandaged hand is a clinical washcloth he's using to wipe off the blood, and the sight alone makes Izuku feel sick.

The man lets him go, and Izuku stumbles back, cowering.

"Mind telling me what exactly you were trying to do back there?" Aizawa's voice, though shaky, is hard like steel. "Or what happened that made you decide doing all of that *shit* was acceptable?"

"I—I didn't—" Izuku's mouth opens and closes, his tongue heavy and his mind feeling fuzzy.

"You didn't think it was acceptable?" Aizawa tips his head, and he brings the stained washcloth up once more when this causes more blood to leak out. The dim lights in the room create dark shadows on his teacher's face, and it scares Izuku. "That's good to know. Now I don't feel bad about kicking your ass."

In any other circumstance, Izuku might've argued that he's the one who did the ass kicking, evident by Aizawa's face, but right now he

wouldn't dare. Besides, guilt is already having a jolly time eating away at his insides, and Izuku can't confidently say that he's not hurting beyond belief either.

"You don't get it," Izuku begins, fidgeting with his cuffs uncomfortably. "You—You can't—"

Aizawa raises a finger, and Izuku has never fallen silent quicker. "Let's make one thing clear: you don't get to tell me I don't get it. That's not something you can say at this point, kid. You can use that excuse when you've overslept, or forgotten something, or turned in a failing assignment, sure, whatever," he says flippantly, gesticulating with sharp movements. The shadows cross over Izuku's shaking form. "But *not* when you're caught strangling your principal."

"I wasn't strangling—"

"You had your hand around his neck."

"He was breathing! I wasn't going—"

"Enough!" Aizawa shouts, and it's damn near louder than the rumbling thunder. "You trashed his office, fought me the whole way here, *shattered* an entire wall, and then attempted to just, what, run away? Is that what you were doing?" He kicks off the door and moves only a foot closer, but it's enough to have Izuku panicking and stumbling even further back. The backs of his knees hit the edge of the bed, forcing him to sit. "So help me, God, I have half a mind to beat the shit out of you right here."

Izuku hangs his head, his jaw clenching as that anger slowly starts to return. "I need to leave, Aizawa. I can't stay here anymore."

His declaration makes Aizawa huff. "This again?" He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Okay, fine, sure. You're never going to let that go, I know. But that still doesn't explain everything you just did. Do you know what could happen to you? Because of this? Are you that willing to throw away your life? What did he even do to you that—"

"Nezu knows exactly what he did!" Izuku starts, head snapping up to glare at his mentor through the darkness. "He deserves everything he got and more! That's why I'm telling you I need to *go.* He's—he's probably already telling everyone else what he's found. And once that happens, I—I have to be long gone. *Please,* Aizawa. Just this once, you have to—"

“What, believe you?” His eyes flare. “If you want me to believe you, I need to hear it all from you. I don’t want to hear anything from Nezu —I want it from *you.* Whatever you think he’s about to spill, tell me.”

Izuku gapes at him, gut churning. “I can’t do that.”

“Why?”

“If I do, you won’t let me leave.”

This makes Aizawa pause, but Izuku is done waiting. Warning signs are blaring in his ears, and, fuck, the voice has returned. And he’s so, so right.

He was laughing at you. He won’t understand. He’s just like the others and you knew it. It’s why you didn’t bother to explain in the first place.

Izuku stands up from the bed and paces. He doesn’t answer when Aizawa continues talking. He doesn’t respond to the way Aizawa calls his name.

No, Izuku thinks back, his muscles flexing as his shoulders roll. *I can trust him, but that’s exactly why I can’t tell him. I can’t put him in that kind of position. I can’t do that to him and Yama.*

If you act like you’re being compliant, maybe it’ll allow you to escape later.

Izuku shakes his head. *He’d see right through me. They’re never going to give me a moment of alone time after this. I bet Tsukauchi is already on the way, or—or at least some high ranking official.*

Nezu said he’s planning to tell everyone. Was he bluffing? Izuku doubts it.

“You need to tell me what happened,” Aizawa says, and his voice is just a smidge softer than before, though still rough. “If you don’t, I can’t help you.”

Izuku can’t respond. He continues to pace, his body beginning to burn and burn and burn like a fire coming back. It’s all too much. The fact that possibly *everything* Izuku has ever done to work towards his goal has been made worthless doesn’t make him any calmer.

The flames build up, and the voice gets louder, more persistent, and Aizawa won’t stop trying to reach him. The blood won’t stop leaking.

The storm won't cease.

And the voice doesn't know when to either. *Why did you not just kill the rat when you had the chance?* It asks, and that's enough for Izuku.

He's not entirely sure how or even why it happens. But what he does know is that one moment, his pain and anger and terror is reaching a max, and then the next, it's all being released as he shouts for the voice to shut up for once. A loud metallic *snap* rings out in the room, and finally, there is silence.

Izuku's arms fall to his sides, and he looks down, confused, as the buzzing restraints fizzle out of energy and slide right off his body. Some parts of it disintegrate, like it was just burned, and the remnants drift to the floor, reminding Izuku suddenly of someone he thought he used to know so well.

The realization of what he just did doesn't set in until he feels the way Extract floods his mind once again, relieved to be home where it belongs.

He broke through the quirk suppressing cuffs as if they were made from nothing more than twigs.

When Izuku glances up, his mind already racing with hundreds of thoughts, he sees that Aizawa doesn't even look surprised.

Chapter End Notes

> the vestiges were worried about izuku using the ofa realm badly when they should've been watching the other vestige izuku. what did they expect from a soul as lonely as his? can anyone fault him for wanting to be with the father he should've had?
>
> one of my chihuahuas passed away recently in his sleep, as he was unable to get better. he was a little old and i knew that this was coming sooner or later bc of the damage his previous owners left on him, but it still sorta hurts. he was so quiet and sweet, and now he's quieter still. now i have only my other chihuahua, angel, and im sad to leave her behind when i go to college. i fear ive grown too attached to the love i cannot hold close to me. but anyway, i appreciate all of the comments i received on the last chapter. i wasn't so sure of it, but im glad to see it made people feel things! youve all helped make my days so much brighter. you guys know the drill by now: love yourself and love your friends, and stay goated. love even if you don't think it'll last

listened to futile devices - yt while writing the last scene

t

how father raised me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone has temptations. Most of the time, they're unwanted. They're horrific, intrusive thoughts that make the person experiencing them want to hide away in guilt and shame.

They're called temptations precisely because the person knows they shouldn't have it. They shouldn't do it. They shouldn't want it.

But the tricky thing about temptations is that sometimes they make you think you need it.

Izuku had many temptations as a child. Even overlooking the shadows beckoning him into alleyways and dark corners, even forgetting the voices that would draw him into places he knew he wasn't allowed—Izuku just had many things he wanted.

He had many things he was convinced he needed.

Did Izuku really need to go outside when he was just shy of seven years old? Did he need to disobey Father and run out of the facility in the dead of night, barefoot and out of breath with adrenaline, just to see the stars he was promised would be there to greet him?

Did he need to be caught?

Izuku's worst temptation occurred on the same day he first saw Kurogiri kill someone.

Or maybe it wasn't a someone. Maybe it was a some *thing*.

The basement was always off limits. There was an entire labyrinth down there. An entire new facility that Izuku wasn't permitted to see or use. But Tomura was. Not that he ever made a habit of going down there unless All for One directed him to.

But Izuku didn't understand the *why* behind it all then. He just knew there were monsters down there, and he knew he wasn't big enough. Father said so.

Izuku only wanted to prove he was strong, just like his brother.

And so when the temptation became too much, Izuku succumbed to the voices and went down those pristine white hallways. He nearly didn't return.

On the worst days of Izuku's life, he wishes he didn't.

Father wasn't home, and the doctor was absent. Izuku would've been killed if not for Kurogiri's quick thinking. A few well placed portals and the wretched creature was sliced into multiple pieces, unable to regenerate. Izuku saw it all, and it was a fitting punishment, really.

Kuro held Izuku tightly after that, his cold mist surrounding them both as they warped out of there. Izuku couldn't cry. He was too shocked to do much of anything but bury his face in those cloud-like arms.

He was just glad Father wasn't there to see. He might've let it play out.

But with that in mind, it's safe to say that Izuku is well-versed in temptations of all kinds. Most of the time he can resist, but other times he doesn't want to.

Izuku opens his mouth then, but nothing escapes him, so he closes it and tries again after clearing his throat. "He brought the wrong cuffs," he says quietly, almost hesitant.

"No. He didn't." Aizawa peers at him through the darkness. "Those just can't hold you anymore."

The words are open. Honest. Unbothered. Izuku searches for it, but he finds no deception in the air or on Aizawa's person. His teacher is not lying. Never even thought about it.

Izuku doesn't like that he felt the need to check. "I…" He swallows again.

The cuffs were for him. He knows it. The grade they were—UA High School doesn't just keep All Might-level quirk suppressants in their storage 'just in case.'

They were made *precisely* for the horrific instance that Midoriya Izuku decided to step out of line. So for Izuku to have been able to break them without any lasting damage on his wrists? Something isn't right.

But just as quickly as the question comes to his mind, the answer follows.

Quirk suppressors come in different varieties. Liquid injection suppressors flow throughout the body and target the nerves that connect quirk functions to the brain. They block *all* connections. Erasure does the same thing but seemingly through invisible waves coming from Aizawa's own body—like signals in the air messing up radio frequencies.

Handcuffs or other physical objects that are placed on someone's form, however? They're different. Since they cannot flow everywhere, they are limited to stopping the connection from where exactly they are placed. This is why it is not completely impossible for people to escape from quirk suppressing cuffs. But this is also why cuffs don't usually work for mutants or beings with more active or objectively more powerful transformation quirks.

Cuffs can only block the connections that are the most common in quirk-holding individuals. They do not 'seek' out more connections if they are sensed, they only block the ones they're directed to originally.

More specifically, they work best for a being with only a few connecting nerves for their quirk.

Like someone with *one quirk*.

Multiple quirks require different inputs and outputs. Too many for even the strongest and longest-lasting cuffs on the market.

While all quirk-related nerves eventually end up around the same area, even just a few unblocked ones can cause an overload. If the activation energy of a certain quirk is high, a mistake can occur.

Is that what Izuku did? Was he calling on his quirks so *desperately* that the sheer force and will of activating them and bringing them to the forefront of his mind made him snap the cuffs?

He's been put in suppressant cuffs before, and that's never happened. Is this because he has more quirks now? Did he just… not try hard enough in the past?

No, no. That's not quite right either.

Izuku doesn't realize he began to stare off into space until he finds himself dragging his gaze back up to make eye contact with his teacher.

Aizawa is just standing there. Quiet. Watching. He doesn't have Erasure active. He's just silent and unmoving.

The colors are fading away around them. That's what Izuku notices first. The small room blurs, and Izuku doesn't know why he does it, but he takes a step forward. He isn't sure why Aizawa isn't erasing his quirks. Is it because he's refusing to, or because he can't? Izuku doubts that Aizawa is able to use Erasure at all right now saying as he's currently experiencing overuse drawbacks.

He takes another small step, drowning in this once in a lifetime opportunity. This *temptation.*

His arms are shaking with energy by his side, and his fingers are twitching involuntarily with how much of One for All is shooting across his body. But Aizawa doesn't move even upon seeing this. He doesn't even get into a defensive stance.

Aizawa's head tilts up, and he wipes away the last of the blood on his face.

"You can go," Aizawa says smoothly, as if they're talking about the weather. As if Aizawa is dismissing him from class. As if the two of them weren't choking the fuck out of each other just minutes before. Tornado sirens ring out somewhere in the far distance. "But I can't say I'll move for you."

Extract bubbles up under Izuku's flesh, scraping against his bones, electrifying him at the near challenge.

Aizawa wasn't giving him permission so much as he was inviting him. But he's not erasing Izuku's quirks, even after the cuffs have been broken, so what exactly does he think is going to happen?

His capture weapon is less than half the length it was originally thanks to Izuku's knife work. It will do nothing to stop Izuku now—it's useless, which is why Aizawa is taking it off right now and setting it on a little hook by the door.

Izuku squares his shoulders, a different kind of euphoria rushing through him now. He understands all of a sudden. The cuffs broke because his quirks have been mutating and twisting. His power output has increased significantly in just a couple short weeks. Aizawa was right. The cuffs were made for him—but for pre-Hosu Izuku. Now, after the multiple quirks he stole from the Nomu and the recent One for All developments, they *just can't hold him.*

Izuku is finally seeing progress after all of his hard days of training. He is getting stronger like he hoped.

It's almost funny to think about. Izuku never thought that would be a thing he'd ever get to say. He thought he'd be writhing on the ground like a worm and struggling with his last breaths first.

He wonders cruelly then if this was just another test on Nezu's part. Did he ask Snipe to bring those for him? Surely Nezu knew they would break, at least if he had read all of Izuku's newer, more personal notes in that journal. Was he verifying it for himself? The idea that Izuku has multiple quirks?

Izuku wants to snort, and he doesn't blame Aizawa for laughing earlier. This is all a rather *amusing* fucking situation, isn't it?

They could've used a liquid injection, and it would've worked like a charm. But they didn't.

Izuku wants to know if Aizawa has figured this out yet. He didn't seem very surprised when Izuku broke the restraints. Was he the one verifying? Does it *matter* right now?

For the first time since Izuku met Aizawa, the boy looks at his bloody teacher, his multitude of quirks banging around against his ribcage, and doesn't think he'll lose to him.

And what a life-changing feeling that is.

Aizawa is weaponless. Izuku can take him, and he'll likely get grievously injured while doing so, but Izuku won't lose. He doesn't need to win, exactly, he just needs *Aizawa* to lose.

Need. Does he need it? Is this another temptation?

Izuku wants to run out into the raging storm and disappear, even though it'll hurt. But to do that, he needs to move Aizawa forcefully. How can he do that without hurting him further? Black Whip?

He could technically try to just break through the wall right behind him, but these walls are most likely *incredibly* thick, and Izuku would break quite a few bones even with his insane durability.

As Izuku stands there contemplating, cold and small and bruised, glowing with power, he swears he can feel hands holding him from behind. Palms rest against his back, touching his shoulder blades,

touching the wings he doesn't have but should.

His elbows are pulled back so gently it could just as easily be mistaken for Izuku swaying unsteadily. His ankles are next, and Izuku can't move.

Except he isn't trying to. But he *feels* like he is.

His chest rises up and down in tune with his increasing paranoia and anxiety. His breaths come out shorter and shorter, and he feels like he's back on the ground with Aizawa's knee pressed against his spine. Anger, so sudden and sharp and intense, nearly knocks him off his feet.

He put himself in this situation, and he keeps failing, again and again and again. God, what would Father say? What would Kuro do?

Stain would laugh in his face and shove him aside, telling him he's no good, he's too slow, he's too indecisive. Gran would sigh and walk away.

And All Might would only look at him through those sad blue eyes.

"Does it make you feel good, knowing you're stronger?" Aizawa asks somewhere in the midst of Izuku's own personal hell. "Knowing I can't force you to stay?"

The words cut deep, but they're not even said with anger.

Shame wars with his rage, because that's not what this is about. He remembers Mitsuki saying something similar to Kacchan one summer night when the boy was being especially irritable and cutthroat. He was pissy with Izuku that entire day and even more so to his own parents. So when dinner was over and Izuku was cleaning up in the kitchen with Masaru, and he heard Kacchan begin another fight with his mother, this one more serious than most others, Izuku knew it was time for him to go.

"Make me," Kacchan had said, but it was quiet and low and, God, Izuku knew he meant it. It was a threat, not a challenge. It's like he already knew his mother couldn't rise up to meet him anymore.

As this was a family matter, Izuku excused himself politely to Masaru, and as he was walking outside to the back porch, he could still hear Auntie's quiet, seething words. And he'd never forget them.

"Are you happy, Katsuki? Knowing you're stronger than your own mother now? Knowing I can't force you to listen? Does it make you feel like a hero?"

Izuku didn't stay to see Kacchan's reaction.

He hates that memory.

Hates it even more now because he doesn't even feel Aizawa in the room with him. He doesn't feel Mitsuki, either. Izuku looks up and sees his mother instead.

He sees a set face. Dull eyes. Downturned lips. It's so real, so visceral and sudden that for a second Izuku almost could have imagined Inko's own face against Aizawa's.

And it hurts worse than anything Aizawa could've done to him physically.

Izuku grabs his face, shaking away the memories and urges. He doesn't want this temptation anymore. He breaks free from the invisible hands and paces once more, one hand traveling up to grip at his hair.

He's running out of time, and the entire situation just isn't *fair!*

He would rather Aizawa be angry. He'd rather Aizawa snap at him again, call him a name, hit him to vent his frustrations, *anything.*

Izuku hates standing here in front of his unmoving teacher. His palms are rough and his arm is completely numb now. The contrasting textures make him feel like the epitome of destruction somehow. Maybe if Aizawa was angry, maybe if he *did* hit Izuku—and not even as a punishment, not even as a corrective force; just as a way to inflict some kind of pain—maybe Izuku would understand him better, as crazy as it sounds.

Maybe Izuku wouldn't be so scared.

Even Father was more consistent than this. Hell, for the first *year* after Izuku was given to him, All for One was nice.

He seemed normal and worked long hours away from the compound for days at a time. Izuku's earliest memories of him are his fondest—the times when All for One would silently step into his room using Kurogiri's mist in the dead of night after completing one of his

secretive missions, when he would place a large hand on Izuku's head to ruffle his unruly hair.

Izuku would wake at the first brush of that scarred palm, and it would be so dark that he'd never question the blood stains. All for One would give a tired smile and urge Izuku back to bed, and Izuku would grin toothily, staring up at the ceiling for long after the man left, wondering if one day he'd get to grow and be just like him.

Perhaps Izuku still clings to that version of his father. This is why he finds it so difficult to stray from his gravity now, even after all he has done and all he is planning to do. Those were such pure moments that Izuku found it hard to believe he could do what he did to him later on.

There is that same six year old child hidden inside Izuku, however, feeding off of All for One's errant presence at the base of his skull even now. And that boy will someday grow large enough so that his father's volatility will consume him whole.

When Izuku starts seeing less of Inko and more of All for One on Aizawa's shadowed body, he pivots on his heel and grabs the closest thing he can see, his emotions overflowing. The ceramic mug shatters when he throws it, and old coffee splatters against the wall and creates a crime scene on the floor.

Aizawa doesn't outwardly react. "That was Kan's."

Izuku grips the edges of the bedside table so hard that he finds himself questioning if any of this violence today was real. Perhaps it was all his fault after all. Maybe this is just a war inside his head. "Good. That's just another reason for him to hate me." Spidery cracks appear on the edges where he's holding the wood. "Sensei. *Please.* Just… just step aside."

"No."

"Move, or I'll make you."

The man lifts a hand as if to say *what's stopping you?*

Izuku hisses in frustration and tears his fingers through his hair. His body is still too tight, his emotions too high. "I'll hurt you."

"You already did," Aizawa replies, which makes Izuku blanch.

He did hurt him. Izuku keeps forgetting because Aizawa is so good at hiding it. So good at seemingly not caring. And that's one of the things Izuku has never understood about him—the fact that Aizawa will preach and scold and lecture about taking care of yourself, about keeping in mind who you want to be with everything you do, and yet he will still lock away the sides of him that are sad and human and aching, even from those he claims to care about.

Izuku hated him in the beginning for trying so hard to reform Izuku, to *help* him. Because in Izuku's eye, Aizawa was the one who needed some help. *He* needed to work on himself a little more. And still he tried so hard to keep that thirteen year old boy on the right path. It doesn't make sense.

Aizawa is not perfect. Izuku thinks that Aizawa must've left behind even more vital parts of himself when he decided to mentor Izuku. And when he realized this, especially after Hosu, God, it was so fucking *hard* for Izuku to think of him the way he used to. When Izuku saw how fractured he was, he was angry.

How could Aizawa and Yamada ever think that they could make Izuku a better person out of leftovers?

Why did they bother with Izuku's personal problems when they had their own to deal with?

"I'm going to skin your boss alive," Izuku says hoarsely, feeling stranded in a place he should know by now but doesn't. "He's a fucking liar and I hate him."

"Why do you hate him?"

"I'll give you one guess, and if it's wrong, you let me pass," Izuku grinds out.

Aizawa doesn't acknowledge the bait, too used to it by now to feed into it. "He took something from you?"

Izuku stops himself from saying something that would most certainly cross the line and instead forces down his bitterness. "Yes. My—it's my notebook. *Mine.* It's special. And he—he won't give it back."

Aizawa breathes out something heavy, and Izuku watches, apprehensive. "Is that it? Your notebook? Kid, you should've come to me. Not go to his office and tear it apart to look for it and—"

“Are you kidding me?” Izuku glowers, the heels of his feet—he is still missing a shoe—striking the ground as he stalks closer with a new fire burning inside him. He points at Aizawa’s chest. “He’s lucky I didn’t bring a leaf blower and a sledgehammer to search through everything he owns. He deserves to rot in a box floating down the—”

Aizawa’s hand lands on Izuku’s forehead in the next second, stopping the boy dead in his tracks. “Izuku, you need to calm down. You’re working yourself up into a fever like this. You’re going to get sick.”

A fever? Is that actually what Aizawa is worried about? Does he not see the gravity of Izuku’s situation?

“No!” Izuku swats the hand off him but immediately misses the contact. This only frustrates him more, and his voice cracks painfully on the next few words. “What I need is my notebook.”

Aizawa nods placatingly. “Okay. What’s in your notebook, kid?”

The soft tone registers as being condescending, and Izuku scoffs at him, not as lucky in holding back his smart remarks this time. “Just my shitty All Might fanfiction. I don’t know, what do *you* think?” When Aizawa only stares on, waiting, Izuku growls to himself. “Everything. It—I’ve had it since I was little. Since my—since my dad. It has all of my—my personal stuff detailed in it. I know he’s read it already, I know it because of what he said. I’m— *fuck*. I’m done for. Aizawa, I’ve been using it like a—like a damn *diary* for years.”

Aizawa raises an unimpressed brow. “What’s so bad in there that Nezu doesn’t already know? Did you confess to a murder?”

Izuku doesn’t answer him, because he honestly doesn’t remember. The chances are high of that being true, however. But murder surprisingly isn’t what Izuku is worried about this time around.

“Izuku,” the man says lightly. The next time he says it won’t be as nice, Izuku is sure. The boy ignores it anyway, back to pacing.

“I’m gonna burn down his house once I find it. If he even lives outside of this damn school. I swear I’m gonna do it. Does he even own a house? Or an apartment? Is that even legal?”

“Kid, quit it.”

“He was just a common rat before everything that happened to him, so is he even considered a true mutant or—”

"Stop it, right now."

Izuku seethes at him. "Don't lecture me! He told me he'd never pry, and he *swore."*

"Calm down."

Those two words just offend Izuku. "No! I can't—I can't just—just *forget* what he said he was going to do! He doesn't bluff; he never bluffs! And I felt it, sensei, he wasn't lying. He—"

When Izuku spins around, he trips over the leg of the bed and falls to the floor, crying out when his burning palms hit the tile in an attempt to cushion his body. The wrist that's been throbbing ever since Aizawa slammed it against the ground explodes in pain, making Izuku hiss. He rights himself and presses his back against the wall, pulling his knees up to his chest as his breathing becomes even worse.

There is no more storm, no more anger, and no more clinical room. There is only Izuku and the hurting hero standing miles away.

And Izuku has never begged for anyone to leave him alone before. Not that he remembers, at least. He's asked, he's prayed for it, but he's never begged aloud. But he has begged for someone to stay.

He said *please* the day his mother left. It became his favorite word out of millions. He never prayed for anything so badly before in his life, but he remembers telling the universe that if it could hear him somehow, all he wanted was one chance to make himself more loveable so his mother would stop backing away with that crazed glint to her eye. He just didn't want to be left by himself.

Here, though, Izuku finds himself begging for the opposite. He doesn't hear it himself, but he's sure he's saying it. The pleas leave his lips in a wild mantra, asking Aizawa, *begging* him to leave him alone and just allow him to do this one thing, and that after this Izuku will never, *ever* ask him for anything again, he promises. And not a fake promise. Not a traditional *Izuku* promise.

A real one.

But just like how Kayama responded when Izuku was pleading with her to reconsider, Aizawa only shakes his head. And Izuku doesn't realize he's trembling until there's a hand on his shoulder and Aizawa is crouching in front of him, his face a foot away from Izuku's own.

It scares Izuku—the closeness. Black Whip responds first. Aizawa moves away just before the whips can make contact, and he sits leaning back with his palms holding him up from behind, his expression unreadable now as One for All envelops Izuku and keeps Aizawa back.

“Izuku,” he says, “you’re hyperventilating.”

The boy knows he is, but that’s sorta the thing about hyperventilating—you can’t always control it. No one ever wakes up and *wants* to not be able to regulate their breathing. It’s embarrassing, and it hurts, and it feels worse than not being able to breathe at all.

Ragged gasps tear out of Izuku’s throat, slicing up his insides on the way out and healing him at the same time with dark poison, a soothing balm.

Let me go, Izuku thinks he wheezes somewhere in the middle of trying not to pass out, and Aizawa offers him such a *horrid* fucking look that Izuku almost wishes he would’ve passed out before seeing it anyway.

“I can’t,” is what he says, and that’s the end of it.

And maybe Izuku really is going to die now.

“No, no, no! Mommy, no! I’m okay! I’m not hurt! You didn’t hurt me! Mommy, I promise! Pinky promise!” Sobs bubble out of a six year old’s chest, leaving a small body trembling against broken glass on a dirty kitchen floor. “Not hurt! I'm not hurt!”

Tiny, bruised hands reach out to grab a stained skirt, but she moves back as if the touch would burn her, and two years ago maybe it did.

“Mommy, no! I'm sorry! So sorry!” He tries to run to her on wobbly legs, but his bandages are sliding off, and he hates having to see her attempts to leave, so his tears work to blur the memory for him. “I can be good! I’m not hurt! It’s just red. Please, please, stay! Stay, Mommy! Please!”

Her shoulders move up and down in time with her gasps, and her wild eyes shine in the dark. With each step backwards she takes, she crunches on glass and steps in puddles. Izuku’s knees are cut up further the more he tries to reach her, and her hands jerk up each time like she wants to stop him but can’t get the words out.

Izuku slips again and falls on his side, cold and aching on the tile. His stomach keeps flipping, and it hurts so bad. “No, Mommy, please stay!

Don't leave! Please don't leave me! Stay!"

She presses a hand to an open mouth, and her head shakes slightly from side to side. "I can't," she chokes, and it doesn't sound like his mother, and yet it's all she says to him in the end. "I can't, baby."

I can't. *I can't.*

In English, it is two words, five letters. Years ago he didn't think anything could ever hurt him more, but he's wrong. Now Aizawa is here and uttering them and Izuku can't imagine anything more painful.

Black Whip leaves him empty inside when it dissipates, and Izuku only feels cold. He is withering away, and he just wants to be warm for once.

A hand grasps his wrist, and he looks up with blurry vision, pulling away weakly. Aizawa's gaze is filled with dark understanding, and he doesn't let go.

What? He tries to say, but he can't even get the word out; his throat is too dry.

"You need to breathe. Listen to me, kid." Aizawa moves Izuku's hand slowly, easily resisting his weak attempts at jerking away, and places it on his chest, allowing the boy to feel the exaggerated breathing. "Come on. *Breathe."*

It's a demand, and Izuku shakes his head, rocking back and forth as if to help stimulate the flow of air on his own.

The grip on his hand tightens, pulling Izuku back down to the earth and making his skin heat up. "Slower," Aizawa commands, continuing his dramatic rhythm. "Go slower. Use your diaphragm, just like you were taught. In through the nose and—no, *deeper.* Use your stomach. Match me."

Izuku tries his hardest to obey, but the black spots are returning in his vision, and he thinks it may be easier to just stop—but Aizawa won't let him quit.

"Out through the mouth. Slowly. Can you hear me?" At Izuku's eventual nod, Aizawa continues his instructions. He calmly but firmly coaches Izuku through his staggered breathing, still remaining a few feet away from him with the only touch shared between them being

Izuku's hand pressed against his chest. "Keep going. In through the nose, out the mouth."

Aizawa sits back on his heels and lets go of Izuku's hand after a while, which makes the boy hiccup. He doesn't want to stop feeling his breathing. Izuku's hand reaches back up to grasp Aizawa's shirt and cling onto the fabric, but he jerks his hand back quickly after realizing what he was doing. And after a few tense, silent minutes, the world loses its fuzzy edge.

As Izuku pants and regains his breathing, he opens his eyes a little to stare at his teacher. A striking thought enters his mind amidst his depleting terror: *God, I kinda wish I never met you.*

It's a harsh statement, and it's not even completely true, which is why Izuku will never say it aloud. Although sometimes he feels this way, it's not quite that he wishes he never met Aizawa at all. It's just that Izuku wishes he could've met him later on down the road, maybe at a point when Izuku would have already completed everything he'd wanted to do. Maybe when All for One would be a long gone threat and Izuku would have long since figured out how he wanted to live.

Oh, he'd do anything to meet future Aizawa. An older, even wiser, much happier Aizawa, hopefully. He'd do anything to meet him when the man has already figured out his own personal worth and purpose.

It would be fun, Izuku thinks, meeting his teacher for a second time. By then they'd both have their lives together and would be able to just focus on sharing stories and skills and laughs until Izuku's untimely end. Aizawa wouldn't have to worry about Izuku. He wouldn't have to take care of him like this or subdue him or just take the violence Izuku throws at him so selfishly.

Maybe they both would've been better off.

When the static pressure lessens inside Izuku's skull, he hides his head in his knees again, still focusing on maintaining the new rhythm of his breathing.

There's shuffling, and Aizawa sits with his back against the wall right beside Izuku, not touching him. *Never* touching him so casually unless Izuku initiates it first.

His mere presence is comforting, with his warmth like a weighted blanket on a snowy eve. He clings to it, even now, with his brain splitting apart.

And after a few minutes, when his heart still hasn't calmed down, Izuku's body moves on its own. His trembling hand reaches up to grab hold of his teacher's shirt for real this time, gently tugging on it just to ensure that Aizawa is there and solid and alive. His breathing has slowed, but his heart is beating fast.

He doesn't want to upset Aizawa or annoy him, but at this point in time, how could Izuku ever achieve that?

But then Aizawa is moving, too. He shifts closer, a fraction of an inch, and his arm just barely brushes against Izuku's shoulder. A weight drops onto Izuku's head, and it's like the boy can finally function. His chest is light as air, and the hand on his hair begins to soothe his dread little by little.

"Why couldn't he have just left it alone?" Izuku whispers hoarsely, his voice just a step away from being a pitiful whine.

Aizawa doesn't speak for a long period of time. His hand cards through Izuku's curls hesitantly, unsure, as if trying to remember how to do something it's never experienced, before pulling away. "We'll get your notebook, Izuku."

Izuku shakes his head. "But it doesn't even matter, sensei. He's already looked through it. He's a genius, too. He probably knows everything I didn't even mention. Tsukauchi is already on the way, I know it. They're coming for me."

"No one is coming for you, kid."

"You can't promise that."

"I didn't, but I'm telling you."

With his eyes burning something fierce, Izuku rubs at his face, wincing at the scratch of his calloused hand against the cuts on his cheeks. He hates feeling helpless. He hates when he realizes there's nothing more for him to do to fix something. The weight of futility is the hardest thing Izuku has ever had to carry.

Izuku can't help but ask one last time, a small flare lighting up during a dark storm. "Can't you just let me go?"

Aizawa peers at him, and Izuku can acknowledge how ominous that question sounds. There is no way for Aizawa to know what exactly Izuku is asking. Is he asking to let him go so he can strangle Nezu

again, or is he asking to be *forgotten.* To let Izuku disappear into the storm he was born into.

“You know I can’t do that.”

“That’s stupid,” Izuku states quietly, turning his face away, except he doesn’t release the grip he has on Aizawa’s shirt.

Aizawa hums in what Izuku would almost argue is agreement. “Everything will be just fine. Just focus on not passing out. I’d hate to have to carry you again.”

“You didn’t need to do it in the first place.”

“I do a lot of things for you that you don’t like.” The way he says it makes Izuku turn to look at him with shining eyes. “But that doesn’t matter. I’m not going anywhere.”

What would it take for Aizawa to stop caring? Izuku counts the hairs on his teacher’s jaw, noticing the new thin white lines where nothing grows. Pain doesn’t seem to stop him. Izuku wonders why he grew so accustomed to it and when.

Perhaps Izuku is more like Aizawa than he originally thought.

“I wouldn’t have hurt him if I stayed in there,” Izuku says suddenly, just to make sure Aizawa hears it. “In that office, I mean. He’s a stupid fu—a backstabber… but I wouldn’t hurt him like that.”

I wasn’t going to kill him. I swear to you. I didn’t even realize what I was doing. I just wanted to reach my—my vestige.

“I know.”

Does he? Really? Aizawa didn’t even hesitate with his response. Does Aizawa trust him more than Izuku trusts himself?

The thought makes Izuku want to be angry and push him away like all the other times, because it shouldn’t be like that, because Aizawa shouldn’t be acting so *nice* right now. But he can’t bring himself to snap at him. Aizawa doesn’t push him away and he doesn’t even shift back to the side—he just lets Izuku hold the fabric of his shirt. The man doesn’t say a word and also doesn’t open his eyes, but he’s still awake.

His quirk is a live wire that Izuku has never hesitated in holding

carefully between blackened fingers. He's trusted him enough for over a year now to know that Aizawa would never throw him to the wolves. He also knows that Aizawa doesn't waste his time on things he doesn't like or approve of. So maybe he *wants* to be here, sitting beside Izuku? Sure, the situation sucks, but he's still here and bearing it, so he mustn't mind *too* much, right? Izuku would like to believe so.

The minutes tick by, and Izuku wonders where All Might is. Has he already been warned of Izuku's imminent detainment? What about Yamada? He could be here any minute, and that thought alone scares Izuku. He remembers the looks on his other teachers' faces when they saw him, and his head pounds. Izuku wants to sink into the wall behind him and disappear like how Tougata does whenever he's bored of a conversation.

He wants to ask suddenly if he's able to call Kacchan, or at least leave him a note, but he can't force out the words. Even if he'd be allowed, what would he say? *I'm sorry for being a shit friend and not listening to you. I've been had, so I'll see you later, or never. Thank you for always being the one I could love without hesitation.*

Yeah. That would never slide. Kacchan would probably break into Tartarus just to kill his ass there.

What's even more surprising, though, is that Izuku wants to talk to Iida and Uraraka. Todoroki, too. He's put them through so much, and it would feel wrong to leave without a goodbye. But even a goodbye may be too dangerous for them. Why did Izuku ever delusion himself into thinking he could afford to have good friends like that without endangering them?

Izuku sniffles, feeling overwhelmed again. This migraine just won't fucking *leave.* His fear is hard to shake, even with Aizawa's reassurance that he wasn't going anywhere. Izuku isn't being taken away or hauled to a facility at this very moment, and while the boy knows it could still happen later, it's weird that it hasn't occurred *already*.

For a threat as large as Izuku's existence, the Commission is usually quick on the job.

So, if they're not here yet, does that mean what Aizawa said is true? Does that mean Nezu is… waiting?

The first beacon of light shines inside Izuku, instilling a sliver of very faint hope into his bloodstream. But even if he doesn't get taken away

(a rare occurrence indeed), he can't stay here. It's just not fathomable. That leaves only one course of action for Izuku right now.

"I'm withdrawing from UA," he says into the stillness, and some faraway part of himself dies at the declaration.

Aizawa's eyes blink open. "No, you're not."

"I am."

The man leans his head back a little to lock eyes with him. "The only reason you're not in a foster home right now is because UA was granted temporary guardianship of you. If you withdraw, that guardianship will be revoked, and you'll be released to the government. That's something not even we would be able to stop." He sits up, as if to make sure Izuku knows he's serious. "Gaining back full custody is a lengthy battle, and it would take a long time to—"

"I don't want you to gain custody of me."

Aizawa hesitates, closing his mouth, and Izuku swears he feels that same faraway part of himself shrivel up and dissipate. Regardless, he doesn't take the words back. He uses Aizawa's pause as an opportunity to explain himself.

"I'm going to send my agreement to the Commission's proposal tomorrow night," Izuku says softly, and he can't look at his teacher anymore even though he feels him boring holes into the side of his face. "I'll have to be out of school sometimes to complete the training they're offering me, so I figured I should withdraw. I don't need the credits offered here anyway, Aizawa. You know that."

He doesn't answer for a long moment, but Izuku can tell that he's unsurprised by his decision. He can almost see the cogs turning in Aizawa's head. "You'll be practically giving up your identity," he warns.

Izuku lifts a heavy shoulder. "That's why I don't want to be in your legal care. I can't be tied to any of you legally or else, well, y'know."

Aizawa's brows furrow. "Or else we'll be put on the shit list?" At Izuku's nod, Aizawa lowers his voice. "You shouldn't worry about us. What you need to do is focus on protecting yourself. You can agree to some of their training and still remain here at UA; you don't have to be a full time hero student, either. There are other jobs or positions here you can get by with so as not to raise suspicions. You know Snipe

is looking for an assistant to help him conduct field training with the second years next—”

Another sharp stab hits him in the temples, and Izuku blinks back the sudden moisture it causes. “I don’t care anymore.”

Aizawa doesn’t mind the rudeness, seeming to recognize that Izuku is in pain. “You don’t, or you can’t?”

“Can’t.”

When it’s clear Izuku has no intention of clarifying, Aizawa’s voice takes on a firmer edge. “I wish you’d understand that we’re here to help you. We all are. You can talk to us.” His tone changes painfully with his next words. “You can talk to me.”

Izuku looks down guiltily and finally releases Aizawa’s shirt, wringing his stinging hands together on his lap. “I know. I’m… sorry. I know I make things really difficult. I know.”

“You could help with that by being truthful.”

“You’re all gonna hate me,” he says again as an answer, hating how the shadows in the room begin to dance and stretch towards him like fingers.

“What makes you say that?”

Izuku opens his mouth to respond but finds he can’t. He just shrugs lamely once more, listening to the way the storm outside is matching Aizawa’s breathing patterns.

The man angles his body more towards Izuku, as if realizing what’s really going on. He always seems to know everything Izuku is worried about without having to ask. That’s always been a scary little trait of his. It’s why both of them argue a lot—Izuku is great at seeing what other people need and mirroring that right back at them whereas Aizawa is phenomenal at sensing what others *don’t* need.

“Why are you so afraid of your father, kid?”

The inquiry has the same cadence as a bout of lightning outside. Izuku thinks they’re marked in his bones now. “I’m not,” he says hoarsely, still staring at the ground full of shadows with his knees drawn up. “I’m not.”

“Then what has you so scared?” Aizawa struggles to catch his gaze. “Do you think we’d hurt you if you told us what’s going on?”

The real question is thinly hidden by the clinical way he asks it: do you think *I* would hurt you?

And Izuku wants to scream all of a sudden. The storm isn’t limited to the outside. It is inside of him, consuming every square inch of his aching flesh like he was made only from typhoons and not his poor mother's body. And it shouldn’t hurt. It shouldn’t, he knows. This is how he’s supposed to feel, right? Overwhelmed. Angry. Backed in a corner.

Father always said he acted the best when he was like that.

Izuku’s nails dig into his thighs. He doesn’t feel the resulting sting. *That’s not fair. It’s not you. It’s never you. I’m scared because I know I’ll deserve any reaction you have. Everything would be justified. I’m scared because I know you wouldn’t hurt me, but I would hurt you.*

He sputters something about not knowing, but Aizawa isn’t accepting it this time around.

“Don’t lie to me,” he says, so Izuku doesn’t try anymore.

Instead he covers his face with his hands, ashamed beyond comprehension. “Sensei. You know, when I felt you on the other side of that door, I was terrified.”

Aizawa’s moment of panic disperses into the air, but it’s quickly replaced with a blanket of nothingness. “You were scared of me?” He asks, almost breathless.

“I thought he told you. Nezu. I thought you knew.” He takes a shuddery pause. “I thought you were here to take me away. Since you —you have the perfect quirk.”

For a second, Aizawa doesn’t answer, and he stares out into the otherwise bare room. His brows go up like he’s realizing something, and his silence revives that same awkward discomfort inside Izuku.

“You thought you’d be taken away because of something you did?” Aizawa asks, and he still isn’t looking at Izuku, something he appreciates for once. “Because of what you did to that Nomu?”

It’s a shock, what he asks. Izuku isn’t sure if he’s referring to the fact

that the last winged Nomu at Hosu didn't have any powers left after Izuku was through with it or if he's talking about how Izuku killed it, but either way it makes the boy irrevocably twitchy and hysteric. "No, Aizawa. Because that Nomu was *me."*

The shaky declaration doesn't receive a verbal response, so Izuku moves until he's on his knees, and he angles himself towards Aizawa so they're both facing each other with matching bloodshot eyes, but both for different reasons.

"Sensei, I am everything the Nomu are and more. They. Are. *Me."*

Aizawa brushes back his bangs, eyes flicking back and forth as he holds Izuku's gaze with an urgency he's never exhibited before. "I don't—"

"I'm built just like them," Izuku whispers. "Aizawa, they were *framed* around me. I am the *baseline.* Why do you think I can do the things I can do?" He claws at his own shirt, pulling it away from his chest so he doesn't descend into another breathing fit. "I've been thinking about it for years and I can't stop, I just can't. It's my fault they exist. I'm the *reason* they're alive. And I—I never wanted to say anything before because I didn't think I could. I didn't want to admit it aloud to anyone because then it really *would* set in that it's my fault, and I wouldn't be able to pretend anymore or forget it or—or blame anyone else, and I just can't keep it—"

"Slow down," Aizawa starts, and he reaches out to touch him again. Izuku doesn't jerk away when his hand rests on the space between his neck and shoulder. "You're not making any sense, kid."

"It's not going to make sense and that's always been the problem. That's why I never told." With nothing else to do but shake, Izuku's hands reach up and hold onto Aizawa's wrist, not wanting him to let go. Because he can feel One for All building back up, acting as the crutch for his other boiling quirks, and he can't stop the dam from breaking. This flood has been pending for a long time, and it's not possible to prevent anymore. Chills wrack through his battered body, and not even Boost comes to his aid to help in calming him down. "But I can't—I can't keep—it just hurts. So *bad.* To keep doing this."

There are seven other people on UA's campus. Izuku feels them deep within his core, and it's like he can hear them too. He can hear Kayama's heels clacking, he can hear Cementoss' gravelly voice—he knows Vlad is talking with Nezu in angry tones, hands slamming onto

something.

Their emotions rise up into a dark cloud, suspended over the entire building, and it has Izuku's adrenaline pumping fast. Those sirens are back in his ear, and as he stares at Aizawa, his eyes glowing with that faint crimson hue due to the overuse of Extract, he swears he can see the figure of a tall, broad man leering right behind his teacher.

And it's the last thing to break the cracked dam.

Izuku thinks selfishly that maybe Aizawa did care for him even on the first day they met. Izuku cared for him, too, perhaps a lot more than the other did for him, and that's alright. After this, Izuku will have to go away from him, and there's nothing more to say on that.

So Izuku guesses his part in Aizawa's story will end just as bitter as it first began, with Izuku caring for him and missing all the chances to say it.

He grips his teacher's wrist tightly, fighting back Black Whip, and bleeds as the words tear their way out of him.

"Aizawa, did you ever really believe me when I told you about my powers?" His head tilts down, and in the cracks of light forming on his skin, Izuku sees gold.

And there it is again: that physical pain without being hurt.

As Aizawa's face begins to fall, Izuku continues if only to distract himself from the shadows eating away at him.

"Did you really think all these quirks were mine?"

Chapter End Notes

> didn't mean to make this one a cliffhanger, very sry about that :((i just needed to split it up and this was the best place to do it. i had to put a lot of background/flashbacks into this chap so sry bout that too. i hope it reflected izuku's bad mental state tho. his thoughts are jumping from one thing to the next.
>
> thanks phan for recommending scared of the dark - boywithuke on yt. I listened to it on repeat while writing this entire scene— and parts of the next chap :(
>
> .

blamed

Chapter Notes

> when i don't meet the line quota in my fic, i must meet it in real life 🌧️
>
> also, thank you so so much to my wonderful friend phantom, who helped me with a lot of these scenes since im horribly ill and my brain is mush. she is a wonderful writer and i could not have done this one without her 🫂

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In this modern era, most children want to be heroes.

In fact, three out of five report wanting to use their powers to fight evil by way of becoming a pro.

Flashy quirks and bright costumes and triumphant grins attract the attention of young, innocent kids who don't know any better. Heroism is treated as a fun and competitive profession by the media rather than the career that consistently wipes the board in most violent suicide cases each year.

It's not fair, but things rarely are in this day and age.

Sansa never wanted to be a hero. He was one of the lucky few who never even *thought* about entertaining that idea.

When he was little, he was in the way. His parents were both diseased by the notion of flashy heroism. They were constantly trying out to be the next test subject for new drugs, enhancements, and support items. They were in a fervor as the need to be recognized and praised took over every aspect of their lives.

They were so consumed by it, so deeply infatuated with the growing economy caused by the marketability of heroism that they didn't see they were killing themselves. They didn't see their behavior for what it was: ignorance and desperation. But Sansa saw it.

He saw the way they mutilated their own bodies, attempting to change their feline features, and he saw the way the alcohol and pills soon followed the experimental injections.

While Sansa saw everything, his parents didn't see him. He was left to fend for himself for the majority of his life.

And, in true cat fashion, Sansa survived off of rats in the poorest sector of Shizuoka prefecture. To this day, no one knows this dirty fact about himself, and he will keep it that way forever.

Heroes leave a poor taste in Sansa's mouth. That's not to say he doesn't like them, because of course he does. He respects pro heroes just as much as everyone else, and he also works with them on a daily basis. He knows they're needed, and he knows a lot of them are truly good. But Sansa has always frowned upon the way they're treated by the public. Seeing merchandise of heroes who have nearly died on the job thousands of times makes Sansa want to throw up every time he walks in stores.

How do they not see how sick it is? How weird? To market such a horrific profession to children, no less?

While heroics was never Sansa's thing, he always had an innate desire to help those who couldn't help themselves. Part of this stemmed from his own childhood experience and part of it didn't. What matters is that Sansa works for the police, and he's proud of that fact. It makes him feel like something more than the scared kitten he once was, the one that fed on rodents every night just to make it to the next day.

His job is rewarding, but only some of the time. Other times it makes him want to rip out all of his fur.

Like today.

"I don't understand," cries a little girl, barely seven years old. She tugs on her uncle's shirt. "Why won't she talk to us? What did we do?"

Sansa watches from the sidelines, feeling out of place. The uncle picks up his niece easily and shushes her, his long tail wrapping around her shoulders as they walk out of the tan-colored room. Sansa hears her cries echoing down the hallways even when the door shuts with a click.

Before him is an older woman with soft purple hair sitting upright in a crisp white bed. The lines on her face are sharp, speaking of horrors Sansa has only seen in glimpses, and the scars criss crossed on her face and neck capture his attention from time to time.

The retired pro hero gazes sightlessly at the wall in front of her, deep in thought about something she hasn't made an effort to explain. Something

that Sansa is here to figure out.

“She’s hurt badly, isn’t she?” The daughter murmurs, reminding Sansa of her presence. She’s been standing in the corner of the room this entire time, her eyes bloodshot. “She’s not going to recover fully.”

Sansa dips his head apologetically. “I’m not a doctor, so I don’t have the ability to diagnose, however I can tell you that in my personal experience, recovering from an event like this at her age is a rare, almost unheard of scenario. This situation as of right now isn’t looking good.” He shifts his gaze away, fur prickling as the air picks up. “She seems to be delirious. She hasn’t responded to any verbal stimuli, but her vocal cords aren’t damaged. What you’re seeing is likely the result of trauma from the Nomu’s blows.”

The daughter swipes a tired hand down her face, sniffling. “I figured. I just… I don’t know why Mom would do something so stupid. She’s always been self-sacrificing—I mean, she was a hero, for God’s sake—but this? I can’t do this anymore. We can’t do this.”

The exhaustion in her voice is potent, and Sansa doesn’t comment on the way her words wobble dangerously. He doesn’t blame her for her reaction. This is the third violent Nomu attack in this area since the Hosu fiasco. It happened in a crowded mall this time, which makes everything that much better.

Sansa moves a few feet closer but still maintains a respectable distance away, his ears pricked. “Do you know why she ran towards it instead of running away? Did she say anything?”

The younger woman scoffs, though it lacks any real heat. “She’s always been obsessed with Nomu. Ever since the Hosu tragedy, y’know?” She wipes away tears with one of her fluffy tails. “My mom, well, she used to hunt creatures kinda like them back when she was a newer hero. She took on jobs put out by the old Hero’s Council, I think, and they were always about putting those things down before they could be aired to the public. Except back then they weren’t nearly as strong as what the Nomu are now, of course. They weren’t pumped full of God knows how many powers and…” She squeezes her eyes shut for a moment, worrying her bottom lip. “Anyway, those creatures are pests compared to the Nomu, but they’re similar enough that my mom’s obsession with figuring out what made them tick and where they came from only grew.”

Sansa had his notebook out after the first sentence on instinct, and he continues the fast scribbling without interrupting her, wanting her to give as many details as possible. If her mother was indeed a hero who used to fight

creatures meant to be crappy prototypes of the Nomu, he might gain some critical information.

“And even though that hero school didn’t release any info on that one attack they faced earlier in the year, Mom immediately said it was the result of a perfected version of those creatures she used to kill. She's convinced that he’s back and stronger than ever,” she says, and her eyes roll a little. “And I just don’t know how I can do this any longer. She needs to stop with her delusions. She’s got a granddaughter now, and all she seems to care about is her past work.”

Sansa’s eyes gleam. “He?” He prompts, tail twitching as he ignores the last parts of her rant completely.

“The demon of the underground,” she says sarcastically, like it annoys her to even say it.

Sansa only blinks at her, and she frowns.

“You’ve never heard of that nursery rhyme? The, uh, the one parents sing to their kids to get them to act right before bed?” When Sansa doesn’t seem to understand, the woman continues, her voice much softer as she explains. “If children are bad or being troublesome, the demon king will visit them at night while they sleep, and he’ll come in through their window or closet. He has like nine sets of eyes and hands, I think, and his teeth are supposed to be sharp like a wolf’s. Depending on the parent, he steals something from the kid—something they really care for, like a limb or a toy.”

At the mere mention of the nursery rhyme, Sansa’s claws sheath and unsheath without him meaning them to. The tale itself isn’t scary to him, obviously, but it’s the hidden meaning behind it that he thinks he understands.

He slows his breathing and sets his jaw, gesturing for the woman to continue.

She does so with a shrug. “Well, there are different versions of it out there depending on the region. But the demon is supposedly the father of all that is evil, so the creatures and the Nomu that have been sprouting up—my mom thinks they’re coming from him. She believes he’s come alive and is looking to take back what someone stole from him. It’s all just so childish, isn’t it?”

Sansa wants to nod and agree with that judgment, but the more he stares at the silent, scarred hero in the hospital bed, the more he’s beginning to doubt it.

He stayed a bit longer to get as much information as possible without overstepping or overstaying his welcome, and he focused on the creatures the woman mentioned. Apparently, they were not only much smaller and much weaker than the present day Nomu, but they were also much more unstable. In fact, the woman reported that her mother would constantly witness occasions where the creatures turned on one another like mindless pack animals with only one instinctual thought: kill to survive.

Most of them were laughably easy to kill, as their durability was equal to that of a cardboard box. Still, however, they were each different and unique in their own ways, and they could prove lethal if not taken seriously or watched.

They were even worse with smaller humans. Children were mauled back in the day by some if parents weren't paying attention.

Sansa taps his stylus against his head, his ears twitching with each dull thump. If those older creatures and the Nomu are indeed connected, that means there was quite the large jump between them in terms of quality and strength. What happened to cause that? Why the sudden success? What caused all the out of the blue improvements?

And in such little time, all things considered?

Something happened. There was an event in between the death of the old and the birth of the new—something that shifted the very scales of the human world. That's the only way they could be connected.

This wasn't a natural progression by any means, Sansa can tell. No, this was a rather huge change.

A forced modification.

He takes a sip of his hot tea, not liking the bitter taste. It's evening time, and he's been running around all day. He's going to need some caffeine soon. It's bad for him if he has too much, but he needs some for this occasion.

Sansa types another keyword into the search bar of his software, nose twitching in annoyance as nothing of use pops up. Again and again, he revises the search and changes up the wording. Finally, he comes up with results.

A blog pops up, and when he clicks on it he's taken to an old

discussion group full of mothers where advice is shared on creating traditions and helping encourage good behavior in their children. Sansa filters for the keywords *song* and *nursery rhyme,* and sure enough, he finds what he's looking for.

Multiple transliterated versions of the nursery rhyme the woman at the hospital told him about greet him. His eyes narrow as he reads the oldest ones, and he quickly copies them and drags them into a folder to review more easily. While there are a few differences in the versions, the same terms and names are used—king, demon, hands, evil, *steal.*

The women in the blog claim them to be centuries old, as they only heard the nursery rhyme from their grandparents, and *they* surely heard it from *theirs.*

He runs a few of the versions into a generator on his nearby laptop and comes out with a mixed version to better help him analyze what he's viewing.

Except something else catches his gaze before he can fully begin his dissection. One of the newer messages in the blog, though still from around five or six years ago, contains a bit of information Sansa missed before.

His head tilts, and he flexes his paws as he drags this one into the generator as well. The result is something not even Sansa can wrap his head around the first time.

Hush now, little one, don't make a peep,

or the demon king will come, creeping as we sleep.

With nine sets of eyes, and nine hands so bold,

he snatches ungrateful children, but never just to scold.

No, he seeks out the limb you cherish most,

or takes your beloved toy, as his haunted ghost.

With twists and turns, he confuses your sight,

a master manipulator of the night.

Through window or door, he silently slips,

with hands outstretched, grin stretching his lips.

His cunning ways include a faulty promise,

of care and freedom, to assure he's honest.

When Sansa reaches the next part, he has to reread the paragraphs a few times over to be able to register them properly.

Hush now, dear child, for darker still,

is his estranged creation, a prince of ill will.

Elusive and sly, the son roams alone,

with a darkness so deep, it chills the bone.

Forever feared, he devours souls untold,

leaving emptiness behind so tragedies unfold.

Cursed by all evil to be silent and grim,

he is followed in the night by a wretched hymn.

Close your eyes, let sleep embrace,

with this cautionary rhyme in its rightful place.

In your peaceful slumber, stay pure and true,

and they shall never claim what belongs to you.

Sansa's stylus scratches irritatingly against his screen as he writes down his thoughts. This computer generated version is not as smooth or frightening as the other ones were, but he can deal. The most important things to note are, of course, the monstrous Demon King himself and his apparent son, a prince of darkness.

The *son* only popped up in the newest version. Is it even accurate enough to use?

Both seem to be manipulators and thieves, but nowhere do any of these rhymes mention any creatures or Nomu-like creations. Unless the prince is supposed to be an example of that?

At this point, Sansa isn't even sure if he should bother with any of

this. He's probably going to get nowhere with this information. He needs details on the Nomu specifically—he has no time to go down a rabbit hole with nursery rhymes and made up fantasies.

But he can't deny it; this is the best lead he's gotten in a while. He can't just throw it away completely. At least, not until he's found something else to put his focus on.

When Sansa has become too frustrated and exhausted to think straight anymore, he grabs his keys and slippers and plans to walk across the stress for a coffee. A package sits on his doorstep, however, making him pause.

At first glance, he already knows it's not his. The address isn't his—as per usual, it's his neighbor's package. Geez, it's getting annoying now. The mail people always leave their packages on the *opposite* door. If it's his package, it'll be on the neighbor's step, and if it's his neighbor's, it'll be on his. How is it so difficult to get right? The number of the room is literally on the door.

Sansa picks up the package—it's the fourth time this has happened so far and he hasn't even been living here for long—and carries it to his neighbor's door down the hall. She answers after only a few seconds once he knocks, and he notices immediately that she has flour all over her shirt and apron.

She's short, and Sansa is reminded of this fact each time he meets her like this. Green eyes stare up and into his, and the fur on the back of his neck starts to prickle on instinct at the way she stares at him earnestly.

"Package," he says as an explanation, holding it out to her before she can speak first.

She smiles after realizing what he means, and she shakes her head in mock weariness at the situation they've found themselves in multiple times now. "Oh, thank you. I really don't know why they keep doing that. I should really call them at this point."

He nods, and his gaze accidentally shifts past her to look inside her apartment. She's cooking something delicious, as he can see light steam coming from the walkway to her kitchen, and his nose can pick up various savory scents from where he's standing. It smells so good and sits on the roof of his mouth, making his salivary glands activate. He can't help the way his body lets out a low rumble of pleasure, akin to a purr. He stops it fast the moment he realizes he's doing it, but she

visibly freezes, meaning she's heard it for sure even with how quiet it was.

Oh, God. How *embarrassing.* He's always tried to hide the cat-like parts of himself but he can never quite manage it.

His green-haired neighbor doesn't judge or laugh, however. She only looks away nervously and wipes her hands on her apron. "I'm making shogayaki and milk bread. That's, well, why I look like this."

Sansa shifts on his feet, awkward. They never usually talk for this long. He normally gives her the package and then leaves, or vice versa. "It smells delicious," he says rather lamely.

"Thank you," she responds warmly. He's about to dip his head and leave when she continues on quickly, hands now wringing together. "I actually tend to make a lot of extra food, so, if you like, I'll bring some over for you to try. I'd like to know if it tastes as good as it smells to others."

Sansa's eyes widen and he shakes his head. "Oh, no, no, I couldn't ask that of you, but thanks. I mean, I'd love to have some, of course, but it wouldn't be very—"

"It wouldn't be a bother at all. In fact, you'd be helping me not waste food, so please don't worry about it. I'll bring some over in an hour or so if you're not asleep by then, is that alright?" Just then, a timer goes off in her kitchen, and Sansa watches the way she jumps a little, her cheeks reddening. She bows in goodbye and makes to turn around, but she pauses suddenly before closing the door. "You know, I don't believe you ever told me your name?"

"It's Sansa," he responds without hesitance, and he tells himself it's only because she was being super polite and making him food that he gave her his first name instead of his last.

He extends a paw on instinct, and she carefully grabs it, trying to avoid getting flour on his fur. Her eyes dim as she shakes it. "Inko," she says, following his lead and giving him her first name.

He finds himself smiling a little to match the look on her face, and his heart sort of flutters at that. A weird pang hits him in the chest, and he doesn't understand it. How weird is that? Perhaps she reminds him a little of his mother, back before the envy took hold of her.

He lets go of her soft hand and tips his head forward. "Pleasure to

meet you formally this time."

Sansa doesn't realize he's still smiling until he's in line to get his coffee at the twenty-four hour shop down the street from the apartment building, and he very quickly wipes it away.

Maybe the wrong package situation isn't so annoying after all.

There is an anvil on Izuku's chest, and it won't move when Izuku begs it to.

He only wants to breathe easily again. He hasn't been able to since the day that fire consumed his entire building. It tore down his home, the one he built from repressed tears and jars of blood, and it took his lung's capacity with it.

Sometimes, when Yamada and Aizawa are fast asleep and not even Missy is awake to judge him, Izuku will reach a point past exhaustion where all logical reasoning goes out of the window. He'll find himself shoving a hand or pole down his own throat to try to open up his airway, as his brain is just *convinced* there must be something there, something stopping him from breathing correctly.

But nothing ever is there. And Izuku is always left frustrated, embarrassed, and nauseous. He'll rush to the bathroom, dry heave into the toilet, and then—after a few minutes of pathetic cuddling with the shower curtain—wash his face and hands like nothing ever happened. He does it once a week, usually.

Yamada has only caught him once before. Izuku prays he was too tired to remember.

But that being said, like clockwork, the aches come back, and Izuku's skin is lighting up. He's like a battery being consistently overcharged —he has only a small body, but his quirks are demanding more room, more output, and Izuku doesn't want to give it right now, he can't give it.

Not with what he's already done. Not with the way Aizawa is kneeled before him and holding onto his shoulders like Izuku is about to disappear right in front of his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Aizawa asks, and he inches closer, not minding the way red sparks flow into him. Despite the question, there’s not an ounce of confusion pulling at him. Not anymore. Izuku knows he’s only asking so his student will say it aloud and confirm his suspicions.

Because Izuku saying it aloud means he won’t be able to run anymore.

Izuku grips the man’s wrists tightly, feeling like a balloon about to fly away and become entangled in a tree. “I never manifested anything but my first quirk,” he whispers restlessly. *Those ‘manifestations,’* Izuku thinks, unable to bring the thoughts to words, *never existed.*

Aizawa seems to hear the last part clearly, however, just as he always does when he’s with Izuku. He sits back on his heels, chin tilting slightly up. “And the others?” He breathes. “What about those?”

It doesn’t seem real, the situation. Because how is a child supposed to answer a question like that? What is he supposed to say, when his teacher—a pro hero, his caregiver, someone he would give his life for in an instant, without even a second thought—asks him how Izuku has acquired his other quirks?

Izuku, he may as well be asking, *how is it that you came about being you? How did you become the monster parents warn their kids about at night?*

The boy’s lip wobbles, and his head moves from side to side, clearing away excess voices that shouldn’t be there. He still sees the looming figure hanging behind Aizawa and wants to blast it away right then, but God knows that would only make him seem more unstable.

Izuku is six years old and swinging from his father’s arm. He giggles, moving so he’s hanging upside down. Except he loses his grip when Father takes another large jump to the next tile, and he nearly falls six feet to the floor.

Father catches him, though, just as always, and he holds Izuku like one would a duffel bag, pretending to not even feel the extra weight.

This makes Izuku laugh again. He’s not supposed to be up this late, but Father didn’t look too mad this time upon catching him staying up with his brother in the gaming room. If anything, he’s amused, which is pretty rare. Being carried in his other large arm is Tomura, who is not nearly as pleased as Izuku is.

He holds his gaming console between gloved fingers, and he bares his teeth at the absolute behemoth of a man holding them both. “Put me down!” He spits, writhing. “I don’t have a bedtime like that brat does!”

Father only hums and says something humorous to his oldest son, who is only a young teenager at this time, before depositing Tomura in his respective room.

Then, it is only Izuku and Father. The man sets Izuku down and leads him back to his room, holding a hand out for Izuku to take.

“You’re much too young to be up at this time,” he tells him, and Izuku presses his cheek against his suit sleeve.

“But we were playing,” Izuku explains, all business-like. He is actually a lawyer in disguise, as Kurogiri often says. “He never usually lets me play with him, so I didn’t want to stop.”

“I see. Was it fun, at least?”

Izuku hums in affirmation, having to take many tiny steps to match even one stride of Father’s. “Yeah!”

“Good. You can dream about it while you sleep.” Father shoos Izuku inside his room, and he uses a bright white stream of light to pull the covers of Izuku’s comforter down so he can get into bed.

“We played that new game Kuro got him. It was so cool! Had a bunch of superheroes!” Izuku beams up at him as the comforter is pulled up to his chest. “The one I played had fire! Guess what color it was!”

Pausing, Father seems to think about something for a moment. Then, in one smooth motion, he brings his hand to his mouth and conjures up a ball of green flames. He holds it in his palm, and Izuku squeals in excitement and awe, sitting back up immediately.

“Woah! That’s—!”

“Fire breath,” Father teaches. “Go on. You can touch it.”

Izuku listens without hesitation. He pokes at the fire, surprised to find that it’s rather cold. “It’s pretty. Ooh! I wanna have something like that when I get stronger!”

Father smiles, helping Izuku transfer the small flame to his own hands and showing him how to keep it alive. “Maybe when you’re older you can have

it. I have little use for it anymore."

Izuku gapes, knowing what he's implying. "Will it hurt?" He asks, wide eyed and full of trust.

And the man only ruffles Izuku's unruly head of curls. "My boy, I love you enough that you wouldn't feel a thing."

How could Izuku ever explain to Aizawa what All for One did to him? Or what Izuku did to all the *others?*

Which is worse? Admitting to being tainted by his father? Or admitting to be the villain in other people's stories?

"Kid," Aizawa prompts, and it must've been a minute or two, because that desperation from before is back. Worry is etched between his brows, and Izuku hates having to look at it. "Izuku, talk to—"

"I wanted them," he admits hoarsely.

The silence that descends upon the earth is the only thing that allows Izuku to breathe again. Slowly, his hands retract from Aizawa's wrists, and Aizawa's hands detach themselves from Izuku's shoulders.

Their knees are almost touching, but they are suddenly so far apart now.

Aizawa opens his mouth, but Izuku doesn't want to hear his remark. The boy shivers, and Black Whip folds over him like a cloak as he scratches incessantly at his skin.

"I—I mean, I thought I did. But af—after the first, I swear, I *swear,* I didn't want them. I didn't." Izuku isn't sure who he's trying to convince anymore. His words are hurried and cracked, like a large stone being chipped away at by a hammer. "He promised me it—that it wouldn't hurt, but he *lied.* And I—" Izuku chokes on a watery cough and tries again, massaging his throat to force air to come through. "I started seeing them, and—and *hearing* them! The people he—the dead people. And I couldn't do it, 'zawa, I just couldn't. I begged him. I asked him to stop, but over time he—he just forced them on me anyway and, God, I know I could've done more. I should've *stopped it!* I could've, but I never did. I was—I was so—so worried he'd hurt me worse or—or—"

His teacher's hands are back on him, but this time they're holding his face, forcing his gaze back up so he can meet his eyes. "Who? Izuku,

who are you talking about? Your father?"

Izuku can't reply immediately due to the way he's gasping raggedly, so he just nods, his head jerking in Aizawa's rough hold. The man doesn't let go, though. He doesn't seem to even dream of it.

"He gave you those quirks?" Aizawa asks, and hearing the question asked aloud shatters Izuku more.

"I was stupid," he wheezes out, still trying to get back to his steady breathing. "I—I didn't know where he got them from. I never realized it until after the first time. I didn't want 'em after that, I promise. I promise you, sir, *I didn't want it.* I didn't, I didn't. I would've never asked if I knew, you gotta believe me. I didn't want them, I…" His chest twitches, and Izuku chokes on a sudden lump in his throat.

But then Aizawa is moving closer to him, and his calloused hands are squeezing Izuku's face even tighter to bring him away from his thoughts. "Okay, kid, alright. I know, I know, just breathe."

Izuku just shakes his head and repeats himself, because it's not enough. Aizawa just doesn't get it. He'll never get it, and that's not his fault. The blame is only Izuku's. "No, you don't understand. I—I really tried. I tried to be good so he wouldn't do it, but he—he never cared after… after what happened with A—" He hiccups again, and it burns his lungs. "And he… I…"

The babbling continues even when Aizawa does the unthinkable. His teacher moves forward, his hands leaving Izuku's face and instead resting in the air between them, twitching, as if unsure of where to go. A few moments later, though, Aizawa's arms are tightening around him in an awkward sort of embrace, and Izuku is so far gone that he doesn't even realize it at first.

I didn't want them, he repeats into the sudden warmth that is Aizawa's shirt, and the warmth responds with shaky affirmation.

"I believe you, Izuku. I believe you. You didn't want it. I know you didn't. I know. You—you're alright." Aizawa holds Izuku close to him, and they're both still sitting uncomfortably on the cold ground. But neither of them seem to care much.

Aizawa's reassurance that he believes Izuku makes the boy want to openly sob, but he bites his lip hard and buries his face into the man's chest instead, not willing to let that part of himself be made available to the world, even if it's with just Aizawa.

“He hurt me,” Izuku admits, muffled by the shirt, but Aizawa hears it anyway, and it’s like Izuku is unable to shut up now that he’s gone and said it. “Hurt me ‘cause I wasn’t strong enough then. It’s why I have their quirks, sir. I wasn’t strong.”

I was never strong enough. Not for him.

Aizawa doesn’t speak for a long moment, and Izuku finds himself wrapping his arms around him to return the embrace. His teacher is like an anchor right now and he *needs* to feel him, as he can’t stand the thought of being alone with himself. “Oh, kid,” Aizawa says quietly, and he shifts so his back is against the wall again and he can more easily hold Izuku.

And it doesn’t make sense, even then. Because this is a hug, right? That’s what this is? A *hug?*

Yamada has hugged him before and so have his friends. But Aizawa has never done it before. He’s not that type of person. Izuku never was either. He hates to think that maybe Aizawa feels like he’s forced to do this, like he’s forced to give out this kind of comfort when he would rather be doing anything else.

But Yamada told him he deserves to be cared for, right? All those nights ago when Izuku ran for the first time with them, he said he was still good, so that has to mean something.

Izuku likes to think he was born good. When he took that first gasp of air and cried out, pressed against his mother’s chest, he was good, wasn’t he? Maybe it’s just that he’s progressively grown worse over the years then. He remembers being eleven years old and cold, gripping a cracked bathroom sink and repeating *I am not afraid to keep living, I am not afraid of the monsters I’m made up of.*

Liar greeted him in every reflection for the following years, drawn from his own blood. And Izuku would question, each time, when he would stop blaming Father for every wrong thing about him.

“They belonged to other people first,” Izuku says, itching to explain himself further, needing Aizawa to *understand.* “He took them and gave ‘em to me, but—but sometimes I…I…”

“You what?” Aizawa prompts, and he’s still holding Izuku, not letting go. His body is stiff, like he’s still not fully comfortable with the entire situation, but his voice betrays his wild feelings.

Izuku gets the sudden horrid urge to ask Aizawa if he's ever regretted anything so badly that he would kill himself to have a chance to redo it, but he refrains. Maybe Aizawa knows how that feels intimately. Maybe he's experienced that many, many times before. If he has, Izuku does not need to explain his wretched thoughts. If he has not, Izuku still cannot explain.

"You can't tell him," Izuku pleads instead, clawing at Aizawa's shirt. "You can't. You *can't.*"

A soft hiss of breath leaves Aizawa's mouth. "I'm going to have to tell Mic, kid, you know that. He can—"

"Not him," Izuku interrupts. "All Might. You can't tell him, sir. He'll know. He'll hate me!"

The sure way Izuku says it has Aizawa pausing with his mouth agape for the second time. He looks down at Izuku's trembling form and asks, as if nearly afraid of the answer, "Why do you think that?"

"'Cause I *lied.* I never told him what I was. I—I took advantage of his —his trust. I'm not who he thinks I am. I should've—I should've told him, 'zawa, but I didn't. 'Cause I knew he'd be mad. And that's just… *wrong.* I'm wrong."

Aizawa's chest gives a weird spasm at that. He shifts, and Izuku doesn't let go of him even as the man speaks with a low rumble. "Don't say that, kid."

"But it's true. I lied, and he'll hate me, and I'd deserve it because I'm —"

"Why does it matter who you were before?" Aizawa asks forcefully, surprising Izuku. And though he can't see the man's face, he can imagine the firmness of his expression—the way his brows downturn, the way his skin stretches tightly over his cheekbones as his jaw sets. It's all so scarily familiar and he isn't even witnessing it this time. "What you are now is just fine, Izuku. You're a hero student, and while you're still a stubborn lawbreaker, you've got heart. Yagi knows that, or else he wouldn't be training you. That's what matters right now. Don't worry about what he'll think."

Izuku's head jerks from side to side, his next words slightly muffled with how much he's pressing against Aizawa now. "This is different. I'm—I'm everything he's been fighting to destroy. And I knew that from the start."

Aizawa sighs. Izuku feels the way it ruffles his hair slightly from above. “You gotta give me something more than that. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

But Izuku, who is now focusing intently on stopping his word vomit and intense upheaval of emotions, does not answer or provide an explanation. He just holds Aizawa, fearing the man will cut off the contact at any moment, and matches his breathing with his like how they did a few minutes before.

The storm outside continues to rage, howling for the entire building to hear. Izuku listens to it as a backdrop to Aizawa’s steady and strong heartbeat. It’s a strange thing, listening to someone else’s heart. It’s weirdly… comforting. And personal.

Maybe a few days ago, Izuku would feel extremely out of place doing this—hell, even a few hours ago, Izuku never would’ve dreamed of doing it—but right now, he just doesn’t want to pull away. It’s awkward, sure, but Aizawa doesn’t have any strong emotions of anger or resentment or anything of the sort due to the situation, so Izuku figures it’s okay to be selfish for just a little longer.

He fears that if he can’t have this, he won’t be able to calm down at all. He’s been so focused on Aizawa’s words that he didn’t even realize Black Whip was still active and floating around. All of his other quirks are alive and buzzing under his flesh, too.

If he doesn’t calm down, he’s going to crack.

One of Aizawa’s hands slowly moves up and down Izuku’s back in what’s probably supposed to be a soothing manner, but it’s done a little too stiffly to do the trick. Not that Izuku could ever ask for anything else.

For a while it’s just them, the thunder outside, and the overwhelming cloud of worry and paranoia hanging in the air. Eventually, when Izuku has calmed down enough to at least force Black Whip back under his skin, Aizawa speaks again, hushed. “Kid, I know what it’s like to feel… helpless.”

The boy sniffs and moves his face so he can peek out from his teacher’s shirt. He sees Aizawa’s jaw, littered with thin scars and covered with scruff, but not his eyes; Aizawa is staring at the ceiling, almost as if imagining for a moment that they’re both anywhere else.

Maybe they’re the same in that UA is both a safe haven and a

reminder of the things they lost and can't control. Maybe they both love it and loathe it, unable to leave.

"I know what it's like to feel alone. Like you have no one you can turn to but yourself. Like you've just been… brushed aside. Thrown away once it's decided you're not worth it anymore." Aizawa swallows—Izuku watches the way his throat moves. And for the hundredth time, the boy guiltily wonders what it must be like to be on the other end of this sort of conversation. What could you ever possibly say in those shoes? "I don't want you to think you have to feel that way here. Especially with me. I…" Aizawa sighs and glances down, and for the first time his intense obsidian eyes meet Izuku's shining emerald ones and don't break away. "You know, you're allowed to tell me some of this is my fault."

Izuku pauses, sniffing. Is this Aizawa's fault? Maybe before, Izuku did think Aizawa was a huge reason for his stress and agitation. Maybe before, post-Hosu, Izuku was so *angry* and defiant because he didn't want to admit that he was just too weak, that everything that's transpired ever since his apartment fire was because of his own failures. So, Izuku pushed all of that blame onto Aizawa because it was easy.

Because he knew Aizawa would take it so readily and without complaint.

It's only at this moment that Izuku realizes his teacher might've accepted it because he truly believed he deserved it.

When Izuku can't answer, too lost in thought, Aizawa continues on.

"So, I guess I know what it's like to feel…" He brings a hand up to his head and makes a gentle waving motion outwards. "Different. Than everyone else."

Izuku frowns, pressing his cheek against Aizawa's chest and staring off to the side. "I'm not different," he forces out, his voice rough and scratchy.

Am I?

He knows he's weirder than most other teenagers. He knows he can go completely nonverbal at times, a lot of times for no reason at all. He knows he freaks people out. He has a weird attitude and inconsistent personality depending on who he's talking to at the moment. He's spooky.

Yeah. He hears how the other classes talk about him. He also hears how his own class *defends* him.

Most of them do. Some stay quiet.

But does all of that make him the *bad* kind of different? Does that make him unusual? Too creepy to be around?

“It’s not an insult, kid,” Aizawa says, still as quiet as ever.

“Sometimes I think it is.”

Aizawa lets out a tired breath. “I know.”

“You’re mad at me,” Izuku starts, listening carefully to Aizawa’s heart to gauge his reaction. “For real this time. I can tell.”

Izuku can sense it all around in the air, pressing against his temples. With each passing moment, the anger hiding beneath Aizawa’s worry and guilt grows stronger, and it’s obvious it’s gnawing at him.

“Yeah,” Aizawa admits in a rather not-mad way, “but that’s alright.” A heavy hand lands on Izuku’s hair, and this time it’s a lot less hesitant than before. “I know you’re frustrated. And I know you were overwhelmed and you probably felt betrayed, in danger, and vulnerable. I get that. But…” He breaks off, searching for the right words. “That isn’t an excuse for what you did, and I know you understand that. You almost hurt Nezu. You ruined his important supplies. The safety measures meant to keep the entire school in order —looks like you damaged those control modules, which puts everyone else here in danger too. Not to mention all of the other damages you caused to UA’s property.” Aizawa shifts so Izuku is forced to move with him and look him in the eye. “And what if you did manage to leave? Or we caught you out on the streets? It might’ve leaked to the public, and the government would take you away from us for good.”

“I’m sorry,” Izuku whispers, too tired to fight anymore. He doesn’t think he wants to fight ever again.

“I know.”

The excruciating tenderness in Aizawa’s voice is so heart-wrenching that Izuku is glued to only him and his words for an unknown amount of time. He is floating along in a void so deep and expansive that he isn’t sure where he’s headed or where he came from, only that Aizawa is with him and so that means the destination must be okay. Nothing

else could matter in this state.

How could Izuku have ever wanted to leave Aizawa behind? He wanted to keep him safe, sure, but pushing that aside, why was Izuku ever so bitter with him?

His mind drowned in the idea of just being his student, so what did being his *kid* do that made his soul so upset?

Izuku is not his mother's, or his father's, not anymore, but he still cannot be anyone else's. Perhaps that includes being Aizawa's.

Eventually, when another bout of lightning shakes the earth, Izuku detaches himself from Aizawa and instead sits beside him against the wall, too exhausted to even feel embarrassed. Aizawa stretches his limbs a little in the corner of Izuku's eye, and joints pop and roll.

"Izuku," Aizawa says seriously, garnering his attention so effortlessly. "I don't want you to ever stop me from restraining you or using my quirk on you again, do you understand?"

Father stares with inquisitive red eyes. "Why do you feel the need to continue wearing those gloves? You think I can't handle an unpleasant situation?"

"It's a safety issue, kid. It's not to protect us—it's to protect you. That's the main goal."

"You won't hurt me. I would never need you to restrain yourself in such a way. I have other methods to help if the circumstances call for it."

Izuku shivers. "I was scared," he says as an explanation, but not an excuse.

"I know," Aizawa says again. It should be annoying, or even sad, but it's not. Izuku finds the assurance comforting.

Izuku opens his mouth to respond, maybe to apologize again, but the words escape him once he breaks off into a coughing fit.

Aizawa winces and moves a hand to Izuku's back, carefully rubbing it. "We should get you to the old lady soon. She should be almost here by now."

"No," Izuku says hoarsely, wishing he had a water bottle right now. "Everything is, uh, already healing. And I… kinda deserve this," he

adds in a small voice, staring at all the scrapes, cuts, and bruises on his body. “I hit you first, y’know. You should go to her and get your eyes checked out.”

“You saying that just so I’ll leave you alone?”

You’ve got me figured out, Izuku wants to say, but the sarcasm has completely left his body, and all he wants right now is a blanket of some kind. “Not this time,” he settles on instead, and he feels the way Aizawa stares at the side of his face for a while after.

He must find something upsetting, because then he’s pulling his student close, and Izuku’s head rests on Aizawa’s shoulder. All of the recent contact between them should be overwhelming, too, but it’s nowhere close to it. Izuku craves it. He craves that warmth and comfort, and it’s weird because he doesn’t think anyone but Aizawa could give it right now. He twists his neck so his face is pressed against Aizawa’s sleeve, and he rests there, closing his eyes.

No cops, he repeats to himself, breathing as steadily as he can, *no Tartarus.*

The more minutes pass, the more Izuku believes Aizawa’s promise.

“I’m sorry for spitting on you,” Izuku mumbles.

Aizawa doesn’t falter. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad we had the sense to get you updated on your vaccinations. Otherwise there’s no telling what diseases I’d have now.”

Izuku almost smiles.

As weariness begins to pull at Izuku’s eyelids and mind, Aizawa hums a little. It sounds more like a grunt than anything. The room is dimming even more now due to their inactivity—it must be motion sensored. “Right before I got back, I managed to see some of the footage from what happened yesterday with that new villain.”

Oh, Izuku thinks. *I wish I could’ve brought it up myself. I would’ve loved to tell you about it, sir. Maybe in a different timeline, it would’ve been fun. Would you have fought with us if you could’ve?*

“Was that the first time you used those whips?” Aizawa asks in a much more cautioned tone, referencing Izuku’s newest addition to his quirk arsenal. At Izuku’s hum of affirmation, he continues a little more dauntingly, “Did you take that one? Or did he give that to you, too?”

Take.

It's only because of Izuku's sheer exhaustion that he doesn't jump out of his skin. He expected this, of course. He admitted to his father being able to take and give quirks at will, so it's only rational that Aizawa—especially given the circumstances of Hosu—would have assumed Izuku could do something similar.

The boy doesn't move. He presses his face even more against his arm, clinging on to the fact that Aizawa wouldn't be asking him so calmly or be allowing this at all if he was really upset or afraid.

He shakes his head a little. "This one's different. It's… it's actually…" He scrunches his face in frustration, unsure of what to do, and wishes for once that the voices would come to his aid when he needs them. He's already been revealing so much that he doesn't think he can take any more explanations right now, and he's not even sure if this is good for the situation.

What would Aizawa do to All Might if he knew about One for All now?

First, what would you do in my shoes?

Izuku heaves out a shuddery breath. "I'm sorry, sensei. Can I… can I tell you later? When Yama is here, too?"

Aizawa gives him a surprised look. "Sure. That's fine."

Extremely relieved and eternally grateful, Izuku feels his stomach begin to uncoil. His quirks are calming down, fading to a low buzz. While holding onto his teacher, he feels Aizawa move to scratch at his jaw.

"You did great with holding that crane up. For your first time using that quirk, you did masterfully. You should be proud."

Izuku's throat closes up at the unexpected praise. He doesn't feel he deserves it, especially with everything he's just done to the man, but it makes him feel whole again, weirdly enough.

Here Izuku is, spilling his guts and admitting to all of his ugly lies, and Aizawa hasn't moved. He's right beside Izuku, just as he said he would be. Even if it doesn't seem rational anymore.

"I didn't mean what I said before," Izuku says quickly, blood rushing.

He isn't sure why he's saying this now, but he needs to get this off his chest because Izuku is afraid he cares too much about this man and may never be able to admit this to him again. "At—at the hospital."

About hating you.

There are eyes on him. Izuku's mind is racing, and his blood pressure skyrockets with each passing moment that Aizawa doesn't say anything—that is, until Aizawa pats the top of Izuku's head once, twice, and then a third time before staying there, gently messing with his curls.

Izuku melts into the touch, and for just a split second, every hardship he's ever endured has meaning. Aizawa smells like a mixture of fresh coffee and cheap soap, and it reminds Izuku of his own life before it was all burnt down. He smells like the home Izuku made for himself when he was still so young and in need of someone to give him directions to live.

"I'm glad," Aizawa answers, casual and indifferent, but it means something far greater, and Izuku can breathe for a minute more.

He feels small, but this is the first time he thinks he really doesn't mind it.

Chapter End Notes

> you will never be unloved by me, you are too well tangled in my soul.
>
> was listening to memories x another love - yt for izuku and aizawa's chat
>
> we might reach 1mil hits soon :) is there anything y'all want me to do for it? maybe a one shot? a q&a? i appreciate you guys a lot so i want to give as much as i can. though i do want to ask something, just out of curiosity: what is your favorite line or scene from this fic, if you guys have one? that may help me choose what to do
>
> y

bite warnings

Chapter Notes

aizawa my love

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes Shouta wonders if he still occupies space in his mother's mind.

He never hated her. And he thinks she never hated him. There was just never enough time shared between them for any hate to begin with. They were never close, even when Shouta was very young. He can't even say they grew apart, as they were never fused together in the first place.

Maybe Shouta held some resentment for her in his teen years, back when he was in middle school and was inwardly searching and begging for any kind of emotional connection and support. But that resentment stopped pretty early on when he went to high school.

Because then Shouta found those emotional connections elsewhere.

His father, although similarly cold and unapproachable, was better for the most part. He cared, and Shouta knew it. There was never a doubt in his mind that his father cared a lot for him. But he just never *showed* it, so it was hard for Shouta to think very highly of him.

His parents didn't hurt him. They were competent, and they did their job of raising him. But that's where the line in their relationship ends.

Shouta views his mother and father as just that—parents.

His mother made it clear she didn't want anything to do with him after she found out about his partnership with Hizashi, not because of any bigoted ideals, but because she simply didn't like him and thought he was rather childish.

Case in point, Shouta always knew that his parents didn't quite understand him. There was a wall between them, unable to be broken down, and an even larger gap expanding their distance. Because of this, Shouta matured pretty quickly by himself.

At the time, he didn't find an issue with this. It's what formed his

rational mindset. Besides, he preferred independence to being monitored heavily.

But at this very moment, he's beginning to realize that maybe their methods of dealing with him have fundamentally screwed him over in the long run, because here he is, holed up in a dim room with an aching body and a sleeping teenager, and he doesn't know what to do next.

What is the protocol for this? When the child you've taken in after watching over for months beforehand admits in the middle of a heart wrenching breakdown that he was abused horrifically by the *very* same person who should've been the one protecting him? What could you even say to that?

"I didn't want them," Izuku repeats, again and again, and Shouta feels horror settle across every square inch of his battered skin.

God, no one will ever be able to knock the wind out of Shouta again, not like that. Not like Izuku did.

Now, Shouta knew Izuku's father was a villain, or at least a criminal of some kind, but he just didn't know the extent of it. How could he? It was always clear to Shouta that Izuku had been heavily mistreated and hurt, and he figured it was due to his father—either from his absence or presence—but *this?*

Suddenly, Shouta can understand Izuku's struggles in admitting the details of his past now. It must've been hell to live through it, so Shouta can't imagine how hard retelling the story to others must be.

Especially when the threat of that abuser still hangs over you.

Shouta closes his eyes and leans his head back against the wall, keeping his hold on Izuku tight. Very shortly after promising to give more details later about how exactly he acquired his quirks, Izuku passed out. He's still leaning against Shouta, breathing shallow but steady, and the storm is still raging outside.

Allowing himself just a few more minutes to recuperate and wrap his head around the situation, Shouta thinks hard about his early life with his parents. When he had an issue, or when he was upset and feeling vulnerable, how did they handle it? He can't recall. Actually, did he ever really go to them with those issues? Maybe he didn't. Maybe that's why he's feeling so uncomfortable right now.

Sensitivity training can only help so much for situations like this. This is not some random civilian Shouta can calm down and treat in the middle of a catastrophe or villain attack—this is his student. His ward. A kid he's been mentoring even prior to giving him the application for this damned school.

Hell, Izuku *lives* with them, so even the term 'student' is a little misleading. It misses some of the core elements that encapsulate his and Izuku's relationship.

If I were my mother, Shouta thinks, *how would I handle this?*

But even as he wonders this, Shouta finds himself frowning deeply. It's probably not a good idea to think in hypotheticals, especially when it concerns his mother. Realistically, he wouldn't want her to come anywhere near Izuku, as she's far too harsh and uncaring, so why would Shouta want to be anything like her? No, he'll have to figure this out himself.

Shouta hates more than anything not knowing what to do immediately after a hard event. It makes him anxious and annoyed—it makes him angry at himself, because he *should* know. Shouta should always be the one in the know. He should always be prepared and one step ahead of the game.

That's his job.

But Shouta is lost and admittedly a little in over his head. He's on his own right now, and he hasn't felt like this since high school.

Perhaps some part of himself does blame his mother still. Would he be more ready for these types of situations if his parents had loved him as he wanted? Shouta will never know.

Regardless, it doesn't matter now. There is a villain out there, alive and well, supposedly, with the power to take and give quirks. It's an insane concept, but it's not entirely unbelievable. Shouta has read old files and historical documents from centuries ago about a supervillain with this same ability, a man who held control over nearly the entirety of Japan for years before being knocked off his throne by the very first unknown heroes.

So, it's not out of the realm of possibility to think that this old supervillain has descendants—one of which possibly being Izuku's own father. This makes Shouta sigh in defeat. What kind of endless cycle of abuse must have occurred for that villain's bloodline to have

continued on for so long?

Izuku must have a similar quirk, Shouta knows. It's why the winged Nomu at the end of the Hosu attack didn't have any quirks left in its blood. There was no self destruction—it was all Izuku's doing. It was probably the only way the kid thought he could live.

If Shouta is right, what is the next step forward? Such an ability is incredibly sought for. It's overpowered for sure and more than likely extremely helpful in war.

It's also the perfect tool for a villain looking to assume control.

No wonder Izuku has hid it for this long. What would have become of Izuku had he been upfront about it since the beginning? No matter what, he would have always been seen as the aggressor. As the villain. Because who would want to be around a boy with the power to strip you of all your abilities? Who would trust him?

Even a close friend would, at the very back of their mind, have a little inkling of doubt there. And could you blame them, honestly?

It's unsettling. It's not right. It's almost… abnormal.

Such an insane power shouldn't be allowed to exist. No one person should have that power. Erasure is similar, sure, but it is only temporary and has thousands of drawbacks—a quirk that can steal others at will, and permanently, too, is much different.

That's the sort of thing that tips the universal scales of balance the moment it bursts into existence.

Shouta didn't quite understand it before, but now he does. Of course Izuku thinks Yagi would hate him after finding out the truth. Shouta has no doubt in his mind that the number one pro hero has been involved with at least one of Izuku's family members for this very reason. Only someone as overpoweringly strong as All Might could counter a being with multiple quirks. But even with that in mind, there's still something gnawing away at Shouta. The boy spoke as if there's something far more personal to this.

Like Yagi would have another reason to hate Izuku terribly.

It pains him to even think about it. He hasn't had a decent amount of rest in days. The mission he was sent on with Hizashi sapped him of all his energy, as it was physically and emotionally demanding. It's

not often he's given undercover assignments across the country, but when he is, he knows it's always going to be hard.

The actual job was simple enough in the end. Getting there, though? Well, Shouta was deathly silent as he used his scarf to drag away the dirty remains of a brutalized young woman from a hallway so his target wouldn't become distracted and screw up their plan.

Time was precious for their mission, and they weren't offered very much of it.

Just as always, Shouta did what he had to do to remain within the given parameters.

His body throbs with each intake of air, and bruises litter the skin beneath his clothing. Ever since Izuku put his hands on him, Shouta's vision has been blurry. Almost dangerously so. He can make out general objects and detect movement, of course, but he can't see any details at all, only blobs of color and light.

He only hopes it's fixable.

Shouta's phone buzzes in the silence, signaling that Chiyo is close to arriving on campus. He glances down at the blurry figure that is Izuku, who is still in deep sleep, and thinks about how he's going to pick the kid up without waking him. He hopes he's too exhausted to stir easily, as waking up will make things much harder for both of them. Izuku heals faster when he's sleeping anyway.

He's about to try and stand up when he hears heavy footsteps coming from down the hall. He tenses a little, immediately alert, but then relaxes when he hears Inui's telltale knocking pattern. The counselor opens the door quickly and whisks inside upon Shouta's grunt of permission, obviously frazzled. Shouta bets he ran all the way here, if his damp fur has anything to say about it; he can hear the droplets hitting the floor along with the squelch of wet shoes.

"I came as soon as I saw the message," he begins in a low rumble. His gaze softens considerably once he notices Izuku tucked under Shouta's arm, and his tail swishes against the polished tile as he approaches. "Though it seems I'm too late."

"Not too late," Shouta grumbles, relieved to have Inui here, as he doesn't think he can navigate through these bombshells alone. "He'll need you once he wakes up."

Inui offers to take Izuku from his arms when Shouta stands up awkwardly, and Shouta hands him over begrudgingly, knowing it's probably better for his back this way.

When Shouta leads Inui out of the room, he trips over his boot. It's only thanks to Inui's steadying hand that he doesn't faceplant.

"Are you alright?" Inui murmurs, eyes darkening when he looks over his coworker's form. "You look ill."

"I'm fine," Shouta says, waving him off. "My vision is just being weird. Let's get him to a better room."

Shouta puts his hand against the wall and guides himself down the hallway, face pinched. It's a good thing he's familiar with this wing of the building.

Inui blinks at him, unconvinced, but dutifully follows. "Your pupils are unevenly dilated. You may have a concussion."

"It's just my quirk. It's an easy fix, so don't worry about it. We should be talking about Izuku here."

The mutant is silent for a moment. "I see he fought you."

"He wasn't in his right mind," Shouta says immediately, perhaps a little too sharply.

Inui adjusts his grip on Izuku and carefully helps Shouta around a corner. "You don't have to convince me."

The neutral tone makes Shouta wince. He pauses for a moment, leaning against the wall to gather his words. Stabbing pains are shooting through his temples, and a bout of nausea overcomes him, but he wills himself to ignore it. "I can't stop thinking about it," he says after a moment, remembering the boy's stricken face. "I don't think I've ever seen him that terrified before. Not even after Hosu."

Inui hums thoughtfully. "Do you know what led up to this? The texts you sent weren't very clear, and the others haven't responded to me yet."

"They're probably talking to Nezu," Shouta supplies. Taking another deep breath in, he begins to tell Inui the events of what happened starting from when he arrived on campus. He leaves out some of the details of the actual altercation between him and Izuku, not to protect

the boy, exactly, but more so he won't have to rationalize it all just yet. Inui seems to understand the situation plenty without needing those details, however, as he's silent for the most part and thinking hard.

"He opened up to you?" He asks when Shouta gets to the part where Izuku woke up. "How was he acting?"

"Like he thought he was about to be killed any second."

The lines on Inui's face deepen, and his whiskers twitch a little. "How was his control over his abilities?"

"He couldn't keep any of it contained. It's like it was hurting him to try." Shouta reaches the room he's been looking for and opens the door after sliding in his ID. "I figure he was so overwhelmed that he couldn't."

"Which is natural for a pup of his age and background. I'm only surprised this is the first time we've seen this happen. Most others in his shoes would have had more incidents by now."

Shouta leans against a side table, squinting to watch his large coworker gently lay his student on the bed. "I don't think this is the first time," he admits, thinking of the muffled sounds he hears coming from Izuku's room sometimes in the middle of the night. The mornings following these events, Izuku always has deep bags under his eyes and a haunted look on his face that tells Shouta he didn't sleep at all. "I can see now that he's been getting worse this past month. Much worse. I think he's only gotten better at hiding how everything's been affecting him until now."

Inui folds his burly arms. "His class involvement and grades have been improving, though, yes?"

"Probably because he wanted us off his back."

"You say that as though you think he was planning something."

Shouta walks over with some difficulty so he can scan the boy's face. In sleep, Izuku has never looked so still. He is so silent that it almost puts Shouta on edge. "I think he wanted to make sure we were paying less attention to him in case he needed to do something stupid."

"Like?" Inui prompts, eyes trained on him.

Shouta matches Inui and crosses his arms. “Fleeing. For good this time, I bet.”

They both take a second to watch Izuku then, who is still deathly silent and unmoving.

“He has tried his hardest to rush things,” Inui says eventually. “I feel he is under the impression he is running on borrowed time.”

Shouta sinks into the chair beside Izuku, massaging his temples. “When I was on the train ride back, Yagi sent me a few paragraphs over text. He said he was worried about something, that a few weeks ago Izuku told him he wasn’t going to spend his life running, whatever that means. That he feels he ‘needs’ to become stronger now in order to live the rest of his life how he wants.” He crosses one leg over his knee, needing to take as much weight off his ankle as possible. His next words are placid. “What does that sound like to you?”

Inui doesn’t answer immediately, but when he does, he’s grave. “Like a child trying to beat the clock.”

Yeah. A kid desperately trying to do more than he’s been allowed. “He wants to withdraw.”

“As I suspected he would.”

“I don’t want him to,” Shouta admits.

“Of course not,” the hound agrees. “Even pushing aside the legal matters, it’s simply more dangerous for him to be away from here. And he won’t be able to become a hero like he wanted.”

At this, Shouta shakes his head and shares with his coworker Izuku’s plan of joining the Commission. The more he speaks, the more Inui’s fur starts to bristle slightly by his neck.

“I can see the appeal,” Inui begins, “but you must speak with him about exactly what would change if he says yes to this. He will be giving up most of his autonomy—which he has been fighting to keep ever since he came to this school. Everything he’s done here will be for naught. He realizes this, right? Perhaps he is so anxious that he doesn’t care.”

Shouta nods at that last part, remembering what Izuku revealed to him just thirty minutes ago. “It was hard for me to follow what he was saying. He was talking so fast and moving on so quickly that I—I

didn't really know what to do. He was so… sure of himself. And then when he brought up his father, he got even more upset. He blames himself for everything, and it's like he couldn't hear me." His listless eyes scan the room for anything to look at that would make sense to him. "Do you think I should tell Yagi?"

"No," Inui says immediately.

"Why?"

"Because he begged you not to."

"He was his teacher first. He needs to know eventually, and I don't like prolonging the inevitable. It's irrational for sensitive situations like these."

Inui's ear flicks. "Yes, he must be told eventually. But telling Yagi everything the pup told you in confidence will only widen the gap between the two of you. And right now that is a terrible idea. He needs someone he can trust and lean on, Aizawa. If he pleaded with you to keep quiet, then it's serious. I trust his judgment, despite everything. At least wait until things cool down and he can find his head again. For now, I advise we keep the situation of the pup's true quirk quiet."

The storm has stopped outside, finally. They are given a little reprieve, not that it bodes anything well right now. Shouta throws up a hand to show he acknowledges and agrees to Inui's request, much too tired to speak any more.

Inui, sensing that perhaps Shouta needs just a second alone, heads for the door after a quick parting bow. "I wish to speak with the principal myself. I'll keep a lookout for that notebook, too. If he stirs, please let me know."

And with that, Shouta is left alone in the white room that smells like clinical antiseptic. These are two things Izuku hates, Shouta thinks.

Izuku prefers off white colors, and he hates the smell of rubbing alcohol or cleaning supplies. It's why whenever he cleans the apartment on a whim, he always insists on opening all of the windows, turning the air conditioner and fans on to the max, and using as little bleach as possible. He got into a little disagreement with Hizashi a couple weeks ago about this, in fact. Shouta leans back in his chair and recalls it.

Hizashi told Izuku he shouldn't be afraid to use more of their cleaning supplies, which prompted Izuku to say that less is more, and that he's saving them money whilst still getting the job done. Hizashi, however, held his ground and tried to explain to Izuku that the way he's cleaning now is inconsistent and would only cause buildup of grime in the future, and that he would really rather Izuku not clean in the first place—not because he does a bad job, really, but because it's not his responsibility. Izuku protested, using his past apartment's 'cleanliness' as proof that he was right about his methods and should be allowed to use them to help his teachers. But when Hizashi attempted to gently let the boy know that that's probably not the *best* example to use, Izuku pushed back. In a moment of pure frustration, no doubt kindled by anxiety and insecurity, Izuku snapped that Hizashi should find something else to project onto, that he was being too controlling and ignorant since he 'didn't know anything' about his old home.

The room fell deadly silent then, as neither of the two adults ever expected Izuku to say something so angrily—not to Hizashi, at least. There was a good ten seconds of shock sitting in the air, and Hizashi didn't say a word. Shouta stepped in quickly, though, deciding he couldn't ignore what he heard.

He thought later that night that Izuku is probably the only teenager in existence to ever be grounded from cleaning. He is also likely the only person to ever apologize so genuinely without being asked to after spending just a few minutes brooding in his room.

That instance just goes to show how much Izuku despises harsh smelling chemicals and medical areas in general. Shouta understands better now, and he can't help but regret the way they handled Izuku's outburst that day.

He is so deep into his thinking that the next hour passes by in a daze. Nemuri visits for a minute to drop off Izuku's notebook and check on him—how she managed to retrieve it, Shouta can only imagine. Recovery Girl shows up not too long after, bringing her supplies with her.

She must have already been given the rundown, as she doesn't ask for any explanation. She never does when it comes to Shouta anymore. He figures he's been in here so much that she just can't be bothered.

"Your vision should go back to normal in a few days," Chiyo grunts, sitting on her rolling stool in front of him. She is carefully wrapping a bandage around his eyes, her touch featherlight. "But you need to

keep this blindfold on or it will worsen. Absolutely no reading and no harsh lights, got it? Put Erasure on the back burner for at least a week. I'm giving you prescription eye drops, too."

God, seriously? He can't use Erasure for a week? He's going to need to find someone to cover his patrols at least for the next few days.

She takes off her gloves, her back now to him. "Are you going to press charges?"

Shouta clenches his pants with trembling fingers. "Are you really asking me that?"

"Well, you'd be well within your rights, especially since there's no telling if your duration for Erasure has decreased again or not. I'm afraid not even my healing can help you with that." She washes her hands in the nearby sink. "But I guess you're right. I apologize."

Shouta only sighs, trying to get used to the blackness that greets him once he opens his eyes now. This entire situation is just so shitty, and it's all his fault.

"I know that face," Chiyo says out of the blue. She rolls back in front of him. "Quit thinking so much, boy. The worst is already over."

"What?"

"I've been at this school for longer than you've been alive. I remember healing you in this exact position more times than I can count after a training day gone wrong. I know *exactly* what you're thinking, and let me tell you this: you did what you had to do. There's no point in moping like that."

Shouta frowns. "I'm not—"

"And look, he opened up to you in the end. That's a good thing. That means you did something right."

He rubs his shaking hand, the same one Izuku nearly snapped. He lets her words wash over him, and he wills himself to believe they're true. "I don't know what I'm going to do with him now," he confesses, hoping to hear something else from the wise old lady.

But Chiyo only shrugs and taps her cane on the floor. "The same you've always done. Be there for him, but don't let him walk on you. Make sure he knows you're not planning on leaving."

After healing Izuku in one last increment for the day, she's gone before Shouta can truly take in what she said.

Even at her age, she's busier than most other pro heroes.

Sometimes, Shouta wishes she could afford to let herself rest.

Is it a bad thing, becoming softer than he's ever been before? Shouta can't get this thought out of his head. It's been haunting him for the past few hours.

He hasn't left Izuku's side for the most part—not just because he's blind at the moment, but because he doesn't want to be gone when he wakes up. If he wakes up at all, that is. Chiyo warned him that with the state of exhaustion his body is in, Izuku may be asleep for the rest of the day and then some while his body heals from the stress.

It's just strange to Shouta. The fact that Izuku fought him so hard and without even a pause.

His student hit him. Choked him. Spit on him. Bit him. Izuku bit him like he was a *wild dog*.

The tooth marks on Shouta's arm are scabbed already; the radial bruises extending from each puncture are a mottled mix of yellow and brown hues. Chiyo did her best, but she refused to heal any further so as not to knock Shouta out.

It was so sudden and bizarre to Shouta. This entire situation has been, to be honest. He still can't quite wrap his head around it.

The fight near the end caused a big commotion. Izuku was being cornered by Kan and Snipe, and he had to fight off all the other present teachers too. So, when Shouta punched him square in the jaw from behind, he almost felt bad about it.

It wasn't a fair fight. Not that it matters.

When Shouta got Izuku to that first room, he prayed the boy would stay asleep even though he knew he wouldn't. When he looked over,

busy disinfecting his eyes and cleaning up the blood, Izuku was sitting on the floor, looking dejected and sad and—more than anything else—terrified. Shouta's anger nearly dissipated altogether right then upon seeing the cuts and bruises littering the boy's skin. A lump lodged its way in his throat when he saw the way blood dripped like a broken faucet down Izuku's neck and soaked his clothes. The worst part about it is that the kid didn't even seem to notice.

Thinking about it now, after the fact, Shouta can't blame him for everything that happened.

He sits in this stiff chair, his back aching and his eyes throbbing, and listens to the sound of Izuku's heart monitor and breathing close by.

No, he can't blame him at all. Shouta too, sometimes, mistakes allies for foes. He too, sometimes, lashes out and ruins relationships because of his own fear and confusion. And Shouta too used to cower and hide after doing something unforgivable, unable to comprehend how on earth he ended up where he was.

It was worse when he was in middle school. Shouta would bristle when people got too close to him too quickly, and he'd react on instinct before giving himself the chance to think things through. This often made Shouta feel like a disappointment, as his parents were even more distant upon receiving the phone calls home and the weekly meeting requests by the teachers.

They never said it aloud, but Shouta knows they wished their son was anyone else.

So, Shouta thinks he does understand pretty well, all things considered. Because he too can cause damage in ways he never imagined before.

When Izuku stood up on wobbly legs, Shouta didn't approach him first. His student's face was red and raw, already beginning to bruise from Shouta's hit. He advanced towards Shouta with a franticness rarely shown before, his eyes dark and sad and no longer bright.

But Shouta was still the first to make contact. He rested his large hands on Izuku's shoulders even though it did scare him. Genuinely.

This kid, whom he has cared for and protected and taught and carried out of a burning building, scares him now.

But he still deserves the shoulder touches and the head pats, because

just because he can hurt doesn't mean Izuku can't still be kind.

It gives Shouta some perspective, truthfully, on what it must have felt like for the people he hurt in the past. To suddenly be snapped at, out of nowhere, and lose the trust they thought they'd always have. To have to swallow their own fear and reach out to Shouta again.

It's why Shouta sometimes still can't believe Hizashi chose him.

Carefully, Shouta reaches out with his hand and feels for where Izuku is laying. His breathing has quieted down to being near nonexistent, and despite the loud heart monitors, Shouta is still a little paranoid that Izuku will slip away.

His palm finds Izuku's forearm tucked beneath the white sheets, and he forces himself to relax once he lets his hand rest on it, focusing on the heat radiating even through the layers.

Warmth means alive, and that's all that matters to Shouta.

They are an unlikely pair, truth be told. Shouta keeps his hand gently on top of Izuku's arm—the only contact someone can receive after they've hurt another so badly.

They are like animals in a shelter with bright yellow papers attached to their cages, unfairly labeling them by emotions much too hard to explain and even harder to curb. To most everyone else, they are bad dogs with bite warnings.

Shouta's phone buzzes incessantly. He can't read the contents of the text messages even when he goes against Chiyo's orders and pulls his bandages up a little. His vision has only grown worse, the old lady said that even with her quirk, it will have to get worse before it gets better. He may even lose his vision entirely in a day or so before things return to normal.

He knows they're from Hizashi, as he has the AI on his phone read all of the messages to him—some of them incomprehensible. He doesn't manage to reply, as his throat is too scratchy and raw all of a sudden to tell the AI exactly what he wants to be sent.

But there are quick, loud footsteps outside, and it sounds to Shouta like platform boots, and he knows it doesn't matter now.

When Hizashi rushes inside, Shouta can't see him, and it leaves him feeling helpless. But he can smell the soot on his body even with ten

feet between them, telling Shouta that his partner didn't even shower before coming here after the mission.

There's a sudden intake of breath, and it's soft, the way the air moves into Hizashi's mouth. The sound of his boots hitting the tile in such a familiar cadence puts Shouta at ease. He looks up, still seeing darkness, and imagines what his husband's face looks like now.

"Shouta," the man breathes, barely audible at first. "Oh, God."

Lifting a hand to calm him down, Shouta speaks in the general direction of where he heard him. "It's fine. Don't work yourself up."

"Fine?" Hizashi repeats incredulously, and he's crossing the distance between them like he's annoyed it existed in the first place. "You look like shit and you just got back; when did this happen?"

Shouta huffs, not wanting to explain the recent events once again. Would it have killed his other coworkers to tell Hizashi more details? There was no reason to make him so worried. He opens his mouth to speak, but the words escape him the moment Hizashi kneels before him and takes his face between large, rough hands.

Despite the callouses built up from their recent mission, Hizashi's touch is featherlight. He runs his fingers over Shouta's jaw, thumbing his cheek and ghosting the spaces just beneath his eyes.

He's so close that Shouta nearly melts directly into him. Instead, he inches just a bit closer, still lost in what to do from here, but Hizashi helps him out. He pushes forward slowly and presses his lips to Shouta's in a delicate, chaste kiss. Hizashi's bottom lip is split, no doubt from a lucky blow from a villain, and Shouta's stomach clenches a little at the thought.

When Hizashi pulls away, his fingers begin to softly touch the bandages covering Shouta's eyes, and he presses down gently as if to reassure himself that they're actually there.

There's something else lodged in Shouta's throat now, and it's making it hard for him to initiate any sort of conversation, but he swallows hard and tries anway. "Chiyo already saw us. It's nothing serious."

Hizashi's breath is warm against his face. "You don't get to say that. Not about this."

Allowing himself to revel in the touch of his best friend's fingers all

over him for just a moment more, Shouta pulls back and places both hands on one of Hizashi's wrists, not speaking until he's sure he has his full attention.

"Baby," he says, and the word quivers on its way out, unused to being said aloud. Shouta is never usually one to use endearing terms like this, as he's never seen the point, but now is different. He feels as though his insides have been scooped out and replaced with crumpled up paper, and he just needs Hizashi to listen to him. "He was scared."

The confused silence that follows is a knife against Shouta's throat.

"What?" Hizashi stands up, now leaning down a little to still be close to him. "What do you mean?"

Shouta doesn't respond. He can't see Hizashi, but he knows just from the tone of his voice that the cogs in his mind are turning. He knows he doesn't need to explain any further.

The air shifts, and Hizashi is looking between Shouta and Izuku. His gaze lingers on Shouta's blindfold and then returns to Izuku—more specifically, to the fresh bandages around both his hands. They act as more of a barrier than an absorbent this time around.

When Hizashi lets out a shuddering breath, Shouta knows he understands.

"He did this to you?"

The question is asked so faintly that Shouta wouldn't have heard it if not for the otherwise silence in the room.

"It's not permanent," Shouta tells him, just as quietly as before. "He didn't do it maliciously, Hizashi. It—" His voice cracks painfully, forcing him to try again. "It'll take a few days, that's it. I'm fine."

We're fine, he thinks.

Tender fingers once again carefully press at the blindfold wrapped around Shouta. Hizashi's hands travel over his delicate eyelids, as if massaging them. "How was he even able to do it?"

"Caught me by surprise," Shouta offers lamely, not able to provide a better explanation.

Because honestly, Shouta just never thought he'd have to worry about

an attack like that. Not from Izuku.

“He managed to get the upper hand?”

“He’s growing stronger, Hizashi.”

The blond is left speechless for a few moments, obviously stressed out. “He didn’t have to hurt you like that,” he says eventually, eyes sliding back and forth between the two.

“I know. And he does, too.” Shouta tries to hold him tighter to bring him back down to his level. “Trust me, it’s not going to happen again.”

“That doesn’t change the fact it happened at all,” Hizashi counters, shaking his head and pulling away completely. His voice is wobbly, as if he’s close to crying for some reason. “You look like you need to rest. I’ll be back in a few. I wanna hear what Nezu has to say about—”

Shouta lurches forward to grab his hand but misses, blindly searching through the air for him. Quickly, though, Hizashi reaches for him and grabs his hand, telling him he’s there.

“Wait,” Shouta says, breathless, and his face burns when it comes out as more of a plea than a request. “Please.”

His eyes are burning terribly again, but he ignores it. He isn’t in the mood to deal with the pain of putting in eye drops once again. And now is probably not a good time to ask Hizashi to do it. He’d probably miss the drops completely with how shaky he is.

He feels some kind of moisture dripping down, though, and he prays Hizashi won’t acknowledge it. The hot tears drip down into his bandage with only a couple little streams escaping through it.

Hizashi waits patiently for him to continue, but Shouta is suddenly unsure of himself. How is he supposed to articulate this?

You were right, Shouta wishes he had the strength to say aloud. *We should’ve dug more into his past. I should’ve tried harder to reach him, to get him to spill. Because now he’s coming apart and I don’t really know what to think. He’s haunted by his blood, and his quirk puts him in danger with each step he takes. How can I possibly help a kid like this?*

Is there any good way to admit all of that?

Whatever the answer may be, all Shouta knows for sure is that he doesn't want to do any of this alone.

For the first time in his life, Izuku isn't sure what he's done wrong.

He stands above a pool of churning stars, his fists clenched by his side. The black sludge laps at his feet and rolls over his feet gently. It doesn't stick, though. They are like oil and water—unable to be mixed.

This hasn't happened before. In the past, he would sink beneath the stars and drown upon stepping into the pool, but now he can't go in. It's like he's being blocked from it.

Which means he's essentially stuck inside this realm hosted by Extract. If he cannot make his way into One for All, he cannot go anywhere else. He's in danger.

It becomes pretty clear what's happened, the more Izuku thinks about it. He has simply been banned from entering One for All. The bridge has been severed, and Izuku isn't sure how to fix it from his end.

He feels something hot worming its way through his stomach at this realization. Why would they do this? He didn't think Shimura was being serious. He had thought, naively, that after what just happened she'd let it all slide and not care that he was visiting again so soon. In fact, he was kind of hoping for that, as he really wanted to see his master's vestige and be in his presence for just a few minutes at least to calm his rising anxiety.

But here he is, stuck inside of Extract and, more importantly, *not* beside his master.

Izuku doesn't want to believe it. He doesn't want to let himself believe that the vestiges blocked him from coming inside, but the more he walks around, trying everything he can think of to fix the bridge, the more he thinks that this is out of his control.

He has no say in their decision making at all despite being the most recent holder of their shared quirk.

After what feels like hundreds of futile attempts at breaking in, Izuku gives up. He sits there above the swirling universe, staring down at his wretched reflection and those dastardly wings.

He brings his knees to his chest, and as he moves, the monsters inhabiting Extract's realm begin to crowd around. They circle him, bringing the shadows closer and closer. Unlike every other time, however, Izuku does not panic. If he is to be ripped apart again and again and again inside his own mind as punishment for the things he's done, so be it. He curls up on his side, letting the void waves tug and pull at his skin.

It feels as though he's on a bed of nails—not that Izuku hasn't slept on anything worse before.

He tucks his wings close to his chest, using them as blankets, and it's then that the first shadow breaks through the ranks to investigate.

A little creature that Izuku can only describe as a mutated dog comes up to him using all six of its legs. Its flesh is made of disgusting flaps of thick black sludge, and the pieces move like waves with each movement. The neck extends far out from its body, and the skin flaps here click into place like scales once it reaches Izuku. Instead of attacking like expected, it sits down right next to him, and its eel-like tail snakes around to curl around mangled paws.

Bubbles of what must be blood blow out of the ridges between the flaps every few moments, and Izuku watches them float away through half-lidded eyes.

You're an interesting thing, he thinks, and despite his better judgment he touches the creature with his palm, patting its head. It leans down, allowing it to happen, and Izuku's curiosity sparks a little.

He can feel the remnants of quirks he hasn't been around in years broiling around beneath the hot, steaming flesh. Dirty residues of anger and grief and *death* fill up his nose, but he still doesn't pull away.

One by one, the rest of the monsters come to him, all with different looks and quirks making them up.

Perhaps Izuku judged them far too harshly in the beginning. Previously, Izuku would be hunted down and torn apart by all of them, but right now they're all docile and sweet for the most part.

They tighten the circle around him and flop down in the spaces next to him, revealing scarred flesh and incomplete bodies. He pets them absentmindedly, enjoying the slight distraction.

But pretty soon his anger overtakes him again. There is no more shock and sadness hanging inside of him, instead there's something a little more heavy.

He did what the vestiges wanted right? He told Shouta about the parts of himself that would make even the most open person turn away from him. He was vulnerable. He *trusted* someone else. He's confused now.

On some nights, when Izuku was too sad to speak his mind, Shimura would sit with him in All Might's realm and comfort him, assuring him that opening up would be the good step. She was arguably the pushing point for Izuku to truly get help and admit those things to Aizawa.

She *promised* him it was the right thing to do, and yet here he is now —banished.

Did he do something wrong? Did he miss a step? Sure, he threatened Nezu and betrayed Aizawa's trust by hurting him, too, but it turned out okay, didn't it? Well, it went better than Izuku thought it would.

Was that not good enough for the vestiges? Did he forget something?

The more he thinks, the more annoyed he becomes. He has trained day and night, even in his fucking *dreams,* to become stronger, to become a successor that will handle One for All in a way that wasn't possible before. He has broken himself, again and again and again, just to ensure he would make the other users happy that they got stuck with him.

He only ever wanted to make them proud of Yagi's decision for once.

One for All is his quirk just as much as it is theirs, right? Izuku is finally starting to believe that now. So why would they cut him off? Even if it's just a temporary thing, it's too far. Don't they know what he's attempting to do? Don't they know what he's trying to accomplish for everyone?

He shuts his eyes in frustration, burning like a freshly born star. The monsters chitter and purr and hiccup all around him, resembling hyenas. It's been a while since he's stayed this long in this realm, so he

doesn't exactly know when he stopped fearing these malevolent creatures, but he doesn't care much.

The more he sits, curled in on himself, hands absentmindedly petting the touch starved monsters before him, the faster his anger leaves and that emptiness returns.

He sighs to himself. He is hanging on only by a thread. It is invisible and wraps around his wrists and ankles, cutting off circulation. His blood flows freely from the cuts, but when it touches the creatures pressed against him, it turns gold. The light wreaths around them, and he watches it, feeling so very tired.

He is asleep, he knows. How long has it been? Couldn't have been more than a few hours, he hopes. Will he wake up in chains? Will he be in a cell?

The more he imagines, the more defeated he becomes.

He needs to get up and fight. It's his duty. But right now he doesn't want to. He doesn't want to wake up.

He's never told anyone this before, but this is partly why he has problems falling asleep. Not just because his mind won't let him, but because he doesn't like the actual waking up part. He is always sore and achy when he wakes up. His vision is blurry and his eyes are puffy, too, as if he's been crying when he *hasn't*.

And it's funny, really, because it's been so long since he's last seen his mother, but he still wakes up with things to tell her. And every time it happens, it hurts even worse.

So, Izuku simply wishes he wouldn't wake up.

He sits in the darkness, surrounded by monsters of his own creation, and can only wonder if there is anything left for him after this.

Chapter End Notes

> i've been on my own, i've been all alone. i fell on my face, i got up on my own.

> i have left my job and am starting college at the dorms in a couple days. how time flies! mm, i must stock up on pickled okra.

but pls pls be patient with me for the time being :(i am adjusting to a lot of things and I want to make sure I can put out chapters that at least have *some* quality to them, so it may be a bit between updates. very sorry about that :((take care y'all and stay goated

d

every clay sign

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Principal's office is clean yet bare.

The couches that once littered the walk-in space are now gone, and so are the coffee tables and endless bookshelves. There are scratches on the delicate rugs and indents in the wooden floor near the corner of where Nezu's large desk once stood.

Inside this room, there is little life left.

Because of the lack of furniture, there is a slight echo to every noise Naomasa makes upon entering.

"Are you here to say you told me so?" Principal Nezu inquires wryly, positioned in front of his floor-to-ceiling window with his back to him. "If so, I beg that you refrain for the time being."

Naomasa only blinks, the door sliding shut behind him—it doesn't close all the way; it must have been beaten pretty badly. "Why didn't you believe Sir Nighteye when he told you how this would go?"

The mammal takes a cigar out of a polished box and lights it up. Naomasa doesn't mention it even though he passed a *No Smoking* sign on the way in.

"Sasaki's prediction was solely based on his opinion; Foresight wasn't used," Nezu reminds.

"That doesn't make what he said any less credible."

"Do remember that Sasaki is blinded by his distaste for Yagi's current work and choice of a successor. Asking for his input will always introduce uncontrolled variables."

Naomasa grips the notebooks in his hand even tighter. "With all due respect, I feel you could stand to hold him in higher regard. He's been a pro for nearly two decades."

Nezu turns to look at him, taking a long drag of his cigar. “And I for even longer than he’s been alive.”

“Because you are not human,” Naomasa states bluntly. He doesn’t like being rude, and he has no intention to upset the mammal—only to get him to see reason. “You age much slower compared to other species. And you and I both know that your experiences as a hero are a little different than everyone else’s, so they’re not exactly comparable.”

“Well, of course.” Nezu pauses for a moment before sitting down in the middle of the empty room. The smoke of his cigar follows. “But what *you* must understand, Detective, is that you cannot compare Midoriya Izuku to every other case you’ve pursued.”

Remaining silent, Naomasa watches as Nezu stares down at the tile, no doubt where something must have existed just a few hours prior.

“I am not familiar with all human functions and behaviors,” Nezu admits, voice soft and almost wondrous, “but most aren’t. I think it is a shame none of you understood the situation we had only previously found ourselves in.” Soft, pink paw pads are shown to the world when Nezu waves a limb around his head slowly. “Oh, how difficult it would have been for a child like Midoriya to begin such a hard conversation by himself… Someone had to give him a little push, Tsukauchi, or else he would never commit to it. We would be stuck at the start line, never to finish.”

The explanation is clear: Nezu started this all on purpose.

Sure, he might not have expected the boy’s *physical* outburst, but it’s over with now, and Nezu is applying the newly found information into his database.

Naomasa’s eyebrows scrunch up. “You betrayed him. To the kid, you aren’t any better than the villains who hurt him.”

Nezu’s ears flatten against his head, and his white fur begins to rise near the base of his neck, yet he doesn’t refute the bold claim. “I had hoped he would understand. Regardless, I in no way place any blame onto him. I accomplished what I set out to do in the first place, and that was to guide him into sharing prominent details about his childhood—well, perhaps I should say *lack thereof.”* Dark eyes bore into Naomasa. “Though I dare say you shouldn’t be so quick to claim betrayal. Not with what you’ve been planning for upwards of a month now, yes?”

“I never said we were different.”

A pause, and then Nezu hums, as if intrigued. “I suppose. However, you should give yourself some credit. Your plan would be carried out in a much more controlled environment, I’m sure. I’m afraid Aizawa was not the greatest backup plan for me.”

“He calmed him down, didn’t he?” Naomasa counters. “There’s a reason he was able to get Rabbit to trust him in the first place.”

“Any older man with an unapproachable demeanor would have succeeded the same way, as Midoriya surely searches for some replacement for his father.” Nezu waves another paw. “Though Aizawa holds a lot of information these days. Comes with being the one to house the boy, no doubt. I’m upset, I’ll admit. But it’s better this way, I know.”

Unable to keep these thoughts to himself any longer, Naomasa steps closer and continues carefully. “You have studied humans for years—believe me, I know; I read your papers in college every night—but we told you Midoriya would be different. We warned you that he is dangerous and angry and, overall, scared. Cornering him as you did could have jeopardized everything. He is a special case, Nezu.”

Simply exhausted, Nezu tips his head back and sighs. “Why must we always be labeled as special cases? Why can we not just be cases with extraordinary circumstances?”

Without waiting for a response from Naomasa, the mammal holds out his paw and lets his holographic watch hum to life. A screen projects into the air, and immediately Naomasa is met with electronically scanned photos of seemingly random notebook pages. Off to the side of the pages, added floating translations are visible with Nezu’s own private notes and analyses.

Naomasa’s heart stutters. “This is—”

“His journal, yes.” Unperturbed and without looking up, Nezu flicks his tail and causes more files to appear in a wheel-like fashion. “One hundred and forty-three pages of it, to be more precise; only one third of its actual contents. Regrettably, I wasn’t able to retrieve the rest before he noticed and I had to halt the process.”

He walks forward to see the files up close, lips parted. Something like uneasiness settles into the pit of his stomach, and he finds his hand coming up to clutch his own shirt as he scans the dozens and dozens

of pages. The handwriting is familiar, of course, but it varies from being sloppy and rushed to neat and practiced.

The language Midoriya used isn't one that's known to Naomasa, not that he expected it to be. It's a code, obviously, and it's so well-done that Naomasa sees blank spots and gaps in Nezu's translations from time to time, where not even he could figure it out.

Or maybe, Naomasa thinks as an afterthought, the kid just isn't good at consistency. Why would he need to be in regards to his own code? If the journal was for his eyes only and forever, he wouldn't need to write in a way that's consistent for anyone else to view it after studying it.

It's not like Midoriya would ever forget the things he'd written down, either. Not when he lived it.

Nezu sucks in another acrid breath. "His first entry was when he was six years old. Most of the earlier pages have been blacked out, likely to prevent him from rereading—but I managed to recover some of it. I'll spare you the worst and only show what you're here to see, I wager."

In the next second, Naomasa's books drop from his hand and land with multiple thumps on the floor. He stares at the screen in front of him, rooted to the spot.

The first thing he sees are the drawings. Vicious, mutilated creatures of all shapes and sizes litter every square inch of the double spread, even continuing on into the next few pages. As the drawings go on, they become more rushed and monstrous, with ridged, exposed brains being detailed on the heads of the bipedal creatures and long talons acting as nails at the ends of their limbs.

Their shadows are larger than them and darker than night, and Naomasa swallows audibly upon meeting their blank gazes even on the still pages.

These, without a doubt, are Nomu. Or some versions of them.

Seeing the dates, Naomasa's face falls. "He was seven years old when he made these," he says, mostly to himself.

"And nine when he wrote these," Nezu adds, changing the screen to show pages and pages of bulleted descriptions and explanations regarding the creatures in question.

Apparently, there are over fifty different types of these Nomu, and each have their own sets of weaknesses and skills—at least, as theorized by Midoriya. Often, the boy makes it a point to add his own confusion and inquiries about testing out his ideas later.

One page in particular catches Naomasa's eye.

Midoriya Izuku is just about eleven years old according to the date on this entry, and the Nomu that greets Naomasa is large: marked as eight feet tall with bulging muscles and gaping jaws. Curved spikes are attached to each exposed joint, and some even jut out from the spine, resembling bone wings. Naomasa feels like he's going to be sick, because this is pretty close to the moth-like Nomu from the attack in Hosu. Not the same one, certainly, but perhaps a prototype.

Beneath the drawing is only a singular, chilling line: *Fireproof? Not from inside.*

Naomasa isn't even totally sure what that means, but he has a pretty good guess. Was the boy *testing* out these supposed weaknesses by torturing these creatures? And killing them?

Was he toying with them or frantically trying to survive against them?

Which is worse?

Naomasa glances at Nezu, searching for an explanation, but Nezu is out of it completely. He sits silently, holding his smoking cigar between blackened claws. There's no doubt now that Nezu is upset about the events that occurred—in fact, he's still in shock over it. The faraway look to his gaze tells Naomasa everything he needs to know.

And maybe the detective feels a tiny bit sympathetic. Perhaps Nezu really did think Midoriya would open up.

Steeling his resolve, Naomasa swipes at the hologram to search more quickly through the scans. Key words flash by, all highlighted and annotated by Nezu, and compilations of different drawings and rushed sketches float by his face.

The 'Creature' album (as compiled and named by Nezu) ends with more recent entries.

They date back to as little as just a few days ago, in fact. Except Naomasa notes with a pained heart that Midoriya's handwriting was even worse here: slanted, sloppy, running off the pages and lines.

No doubt was he desperate.

Nezu's translation is once again floating off to the side, so Naomasa gives this one a read.

—meant as a test, not to see what they could do, but to see what the public would do. Missing limbs on Mothra denote infighting before release. Separation leaves time for derealization; kept together to build anxiety. Tested on us first. Labeled as a success, somehow.

His fingers dig into his palms as the sentences become more and more like fragments, with only half-finished ideas and half-baked thoughts. But Naomasa realizes pretty quickly that this doesn't mean Midoriya was in the middle of some kind of breakdown, necessarily.

This is likely just how fast he thinks. Naomasa wonders if Nezu thinks in a similar fashion.

A sticky note is pasted over the rest of the page, blocking the words beneath, but Nezu has translations for both the words on the sticky note and the spaces below.

Midoriya continues on with quick details on each Nomu present at Hosu, even the ones he didn't come into contact with, and Naomasa doesn't even question how he came about this information. With him being both a nosy, slick teen with a knack for thievery *and* a vigilante with connections seemingly everywhere, Naomasa would be more surprised if he didn't have this info.

Truthfully, Naomasa is waiting for an entry on the last Nomu—the one Midoriya killed in under a minute, according to the stiff (and almost defensive) reports from Iida Tenya and Todoroki Shouto. But there are only a few lines of personal notes beneath the description of it and the list of quirks Midoriya theorized it had—and it's only two words plus a picture.

It's a head and shoulder sketch of a young boy with a buzz cut and featherless wings hanging behind him. Talons once again stretch from the joints, and Naomasa wracks his brain to try and see if he knows who this could be.

Beside the detailed sketch of the boy, Midoriya wrote: ***I'm sorry.***

Naomasa knows then that this is something he has to get more information on, even if it'll hurt the kid worse.

He continues his scrolling of Nezu's compilations and stops abruptly when he comes across one stack of pages.

On the front scan, a big man with dark tailored clothing is pictured off to the side of ineligible notes and paragraphs. Large hands are clasped together, revealing scarred skin and rough calluses.

In the next, a similar sketch is positioned this time in the middle of bulleted lists of notes—again, mostly ineligible.

More pages follow these, all with different angles of the same large figure. There is one thing in common between all of the drawings, however: the man has no face.

He is either scribbled out or drawn so that the page ends right where his neck begins. Not once is his face shown, but that doesn't matter, not to Naomasa. Not now.

Because the last sketch out of twenty-five shows exactly what Naomasa is looking for.

Large hands reach out towards the viewer, and the sketch includes the details of the ridges of his fingerprints and the small wrinkle lines on the rough skin. Above all else, though, Naomasa is stuck on the disgusting gaping holes in the middle of the palms.

It is all he can look at, which is probably exactly how Midoriya intended it when he drew it.

The air suffocates Naomasa as the confirmation *finally* sinks in. He was right. Gran Torino was right.

And now everyone is so irrevocably screwed.

Naomasa shakes, chest squeezed tighter than a rubber ball, and closes his eyes so he won't fall from the sudden nausea. He had his suspicions ever since the USJ, truthfully, but Hosu is when things really took off inside Naomasa's brain.

"This is the same person, right?" He asks, blinking his eyes back open. "What are the chances of there being another man with these hands in the world."

"Unfortunately, there are very slim chances given the evidence." Nezu sighs. "I'm sorry, my dear detective. There is no Midoriya Hisashi, and there never was. It has always been him."

Naomasa drowns in the confines of his tan cloak. He stares endlessly into the lights before him, something sharp worming its way into his gut. *I sent him back. That night, I sent him back to live with Midoriya Hisashi, because I didn't have anything concrete to get him taken away. I sent that little boy back to live with that nightmare.*

Pushing back his guilt and self-loathing for just a moment, Naomasa hardens himself. "Midoriya's powers; do you think he was given a quirk like All for One's directly, or was he born with it?"

"I don't think you need me to answer that question for you, detective."

Naomasa squares his jaw. "The more pressing concern is if he's a relative."

"Naturally, he must be," Nezu replies, finally facing him again from his spot on the floor. "This is how he had access to the boy in the first place. The matching markings on their palms indicate a more direct relationship, most likely paternal—"

"All for One is centuries old," Naomasa interrupts. "He wouldn't be able to—"

"His multitude of quirks allows him to do anything he wishes. Having a biological child the standard way isn't so out of the realm of possibility. This would also explain Midoriya Inko's disappearance."

The sure fire way Nezu says it has Naomasa wincing. The more he learns, the more he is beginning to think the poor woman was actually killed immediately in order for Midoriya to be taken.

"Did the kid mention their relationship at all? Any hints at their early dynamic?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. Those pages have all been ripped out, or so I've theorized with my models. But you should know that while most familial terms—namely *Father* and *Dad*— do not show up in the journal whatsoever, *Brother* does." Nezu's white whiskers twitch. "About seventy-one times."

So, Midoriya wasn't the only child taken. He had a brother. Perhaps multiple.

Naomasa shakes his head, wondering just how many more kids All for One has taken and manipulated. Midoriya cannot be the first.

“I don’t understand it,” Naomasa admits honestly, wiping a hand down his oily face. He hasn’t taken a shower in days. “He refers to All for One by his quirk multiple times in those entries, so there’s no way Midoriya didn’t know exactly who he was and what he did. And Toshinori has told him about All for One in regards to One for All, so why would the kid hide it for this long? Why wouldn’t he tell Toshinori the very first chance he had that he was still alive?” His foot begins to tap, anxiety coursing through him. “He was scared, I get it. He was taken in by him and he didn’t know any better, but somehow I still hoped he’d be a little more… logical here with us.”

“The abused rarely see reason.”

“I know,” Naomasa agrees. He picks up his fallen books. “But I wanted so badly for him to get help. I pushed him as much as I could from the sidelines. I think I just prayed that his trust in All Might would supersede his fear of whoever was hurting him.”

Nezu gives a dry laugh at that. “Why would it, when Yagi was not strong enough to put down the boy’s father permanently to begin with? It is unwise to think of All Might as the stronger of the two—something my student unfortunately knows as well.”

Naomasa twitches, shifting on his feet once more. He’s uncomfortable with the casual use of the term ‘father.’ He wishes Nezu would quit referring to All for One as that. “We don’t know if he’s actually his father yet,” he says, the word rotting on his tongue.

“Continue to drown in your denial while we move forward, Detective. He has already spilled his secrets to Aizawa, and his blood results back up our claims. Even ignoring that part, biological or not, Midoriya was raised by him, as per these entries. He was groomed like a purebred poodle about to win the first place prize for the fifth year in a row.”

Naomasa’s irritation comes back like a fire. “The analogies aren’t necessary.”

“Regardless,” Nezu pushes on, “Midoriya absolutely despises All for One and frequently details his, quote, *happiest* dreams of killing him in these pages, so any doubts about loyalty should be squandered.”

“I never doubted him,” Naomasa begins, bristling, only to force himself to calm down. This isn’t the time to let his exhaustion and anger get a hold of him. He has a pressing job to tend to. “When are we going to tell Toshinori?”

“We?” Nezu turns away again, puffing out circles of smoke. It looks to be a game of his.

“Yes, we.” Rolling his eyes, Naomasa continues. *“We* involved Sir Nighteye, Gran Torino, and, hell, even David Shield to make sure we were absolutely right in our worries. But we haven’t said a word to Toshinori, by your request. It’s been long enough, keeping this from him, especially since he’s our only hope at fixing this before things get worse.”

Nezu waves him off. “Tell him or not. His reaction will not change the course of my plans now. Though it may change yours. So, let me advise you, Detective. Reread those papers of mine you studied in college.”

When Nezu twists his neck to meet his eyes, Naomasa blanches. Because there, sliding down sleek white fur from haunted, beady eyes, are what can only be tears.

In all of his years interacting with Principal Nezu, Naomasa never thought it possible.

The detective takes an involuntary step back, the intensity in Nezu’s gaze making his insides tie into knots. The room is too bare, the air too stifling with that cigar smoke, and Nezu too much in every way. It’s time to leave.

But Nezu’s eyes are glued to his back with each retreating step, and his warning rings in Naomasa’s ears for hours afterwards:

“And then think very *carefully* about what one would be tempted to do to the carbon copy of his master’s killer.”

Izuku has this recurring dream. He is standing in front of his father with a loaded gun burning against his palm. Midoriya Hisashi is silent, staring at Izuku through red eyes that should be unseeing but aren’t, and smiling.

He doesn’t move. He never speaks. His father always sits, quirkless and powerless, with that same expression of invitation.

It's a dare, a challenge—no, an order. Izuku's last mission. He wishes he could say he assigned it to himself, but that would not be quite right. In every version of events, All for One is the one to give the inaudible command. He holds the controlling factor, even in this situation.

Izuku, even in his dreams, cannot do anything his father hasn't already foreseen from him.

Each time he finds himself here, Izuku pulls the trigger and continues to do so even after there's nothing left in the chamber.

He counts the arcs of blood, the droplets flying through the air, and focuses on the streams bubbling down from the gaping hole in All for One's head. He commits it to memory, aching to smell the metal, the acrid tang of crimson and iron, needing to feel the way it shoots through the air and hits the ground, creating puddles, needing to *hear* the echoing blasts.

And maybe halfway through it has more to do with Izuku killing his father than it ever did about protecting himself.

Izuku breathes hard, the gun sliding from his hand and sinking into the ocean of blood, his blood, not All for One's. Everything disappears, and Izuku doesn't wake this time. He stumbles to the floor of this realm, eyes wide and unfocused.

Laika, one of the mutilated creatures that won't leave him alone, circles him, her sharp tail curling around his body and cutting into him only slightly. He reaches for her and feels her burning, ridged skin. She grabs his arm with sharp jaws, wrenching him up; she's taller than him even without standing on two legs.

Leading him to wherever she wants to go, Laika keeps her hold on Izuku. She drags him through the sludge of burning stars rippling all around them, and they walk for seemingly hours.

Izuku, too numb to truly care where they're headed, is lost in thought the entire way.

He's been asleep for a while now. A full day, he thinks. While he cannot see his real self in the physical world, he can—if he tries hard enough—sense people moving around his body and even hear snippets of their conversations.

Izuku is still in a deep state of rest, courtesy of his healing factors and

Recovery Girl's quirk, and he isn't sure if he should wake up just yet.

After another stretch of time, Laika lets go of him and looks back, head tipped to one side.

In the distance, there is an archway made of spiraling dark matter. Faint light emits from a transparent veil hanging over the arch, and Izuku's previous line of thinking immediately halts, now put on the back burner.

Because he knows what this is. He has sat in front of this entrance for years and years within One for All, struggling with temptations he cannot even begin to understand or regulate.

He approaches, abandoning all caution to the wind, and sticks a hand through the veil without hesitation.

Just like all the other times, he is met with no resistance.

He pushes his way through, heart pounding inside his cracked chest, and pauses once he steps all the way inside, as the air is heavier all of a sudden.

It's dark here. Foggy. Eyes are watching Izuku at every corner, yet he sees nothing. Voices whisper to him from the sidelines, aching for him to come over, but he doesn't. His hair raises, and he forces himself to calm his breathing and wild nerves.

He never dared to go all the way in when he was inside One for All. First's warning rang in his ears all the time whenever he even went near this place—but now? Izuku is inside his own realm now. Izuku is in Extract, not One for All. And, really, he should've known his father would be the answer to his issues.

Since Extract is the offspring quirk of All for One, it's only natural that the villain would have his own little realm inside Extract. A place that, if Izuku's thinking is right, will take him back to One for All.

All for One is the bridge between One for All and Extract, as he technically created both.

"Why couldn't I ever find you before?" He asks aloud, barely more than a whisper. "I've been walking this place for ages since I've been stuck here."

And yet you were hidden to me.

Izuku looks back through the veil and finds Laika sitting just on the other side, waiting patiently with bloodshot, glassy eyes. She led him here on purpose. Did she feel his emotions and decide that he needed this, or was this all happenstance?

He calls to her, just to see if she can go through as he can, and is pleasantly surprised to find that she manages to walk in without difficulty. It seems that creatures like Laika and Izuku are the only things allowed here.

With Laika at his heel, Izuku moves further inside the realm until he can't see the entrance anymore. Distant shapes move on the black horizon, and the voices grow louder and louder until the sounds press sharply against his ears.

But just as quickly as they appeared, the voices quiet down and the shadows blend back in with the void.

The silence hurts Izuku's mind. He almost wishes the unpleasant static noise would come back; he is in sensory overload even without it, though, as he can physically *feel* his father's presence everywhere here. With every inch, every step Izuku and Laika takes—All for One is there.

But as they continue their exploration, Izuku begins to think that this is just a barren wasteland where only his father's ideals and values remain in non-corporeal forms—that is, until he actually sees him.

Have you shown them?

Once the question is asked, it's as if the man simply appears out of nowhere. One second, Izuku is looking around, and the next, a blinding gray and white figure is standing off to the side.

And it's horrifying, really. Because Izuku has grown accustomed to this dark voice he can sometimes hear at the base of his skull, and in fact he sometimes aches to hear it. But standing here now, with the very real confirmation that the voice belongs to the copied parts of All for One's very *soul*…

Immediately, Izuku's gaze drops to his feet. His wings, previously extended in alarm, now fold up by his sides, making himself look incredibly small.

It feels like him. It really does. Izuku can sense the multitude of quirks inside this incomplete figure—and while there is no distinct face or

detailed body, much like how All Might's vestige form is, there is no doubt in Izuku's mind that this being is entirely sentient.

Even without a mouth, it can speak to Izuku throughout the realm and even in real life. Wisps of white curl around the otherwise motionless All for One, making him look almost ethereal, and Izuku isn't breathing.

How could he? When he's standing before the placeholder of a monster?

He knew, deep down, that there was a chance he'd find a vestige of some kind of his father, but he never imagined it'd be like *this.*

Do it again, comes his father's voice, only a little warbled. It sounds so… simple. So non-threatening. ***To protect your peace, do it again. Show them.***

Izuku's gaze slowly, carefully, and with great trepidation, raises to look at All for One's body—not his face. Not yet.

Large, terrifying wings stretch out from the man's huge body. Even in real life, Izuku's father is bigger than All Might, and stronger, too, at base form. All for One towers over Izuku and Laika, and the stark-white wings on his back only make him look thrice as big.

We both have wings, Izuku thinks, too scared to say aloud, as he was never given permission to speak. *That means you have a wing factor too somewhere, tucked away in your inner folders.*

Izuku tells himself, over and over again, that he shouldn't be scared, that he has no reason to be so afraid. He's asleep, and he's dreaming, and All for One cannot kill him here. In real life, his father probably doesn't even know his son is standing right next to another version of him.

But it's hard, moving past the initial moment of absolute dread. This just feels so familiar, so wrong, that Izuku can't help but revert back to how things once were.

There's movement behind All for One—a whisper of breath. Izuku flinches when he sees his own vestige's face peeking out from behind his father.

They look so similar then; two incomplete beings standing beside each other.

Izuku wonders if the users of One for All know that their successor has already visited this forbidden realm before.

The overwhelming presence of All for One moves closer, and Izuku wants to take a step back, but his body warns him not to move, having learned from past experience to stay put no matter what.

An enormous hand rests like a cloud on Izuku's shoulder, and the touch burns like dry ice. Somehow, though, it's not unbearable. How the vestige can physically touch Izuku when it isn't fully formed, the boy isn't sure.

Will you hurt him again? The figure asks, all soft and kind and inquisitive.

Izuku finally looks up into glowing white eyes, his neck straining, and he thinks then that now he knows exactly why First didn't want him to come here.

Because maybe Izuku won't want to leave.

Yamada Hizashi leans against the wall the moment he lays eyes on Naomasa, blocking him from entering the room where Midoriya is resting.

Despite the determined look on the voice hero's face, Naomasa knows he'd move if told to.

"You were on his mother's case, weren't you?" Yamada asks, but he says it in such a matter-of-fact way that it's clear he just wants to hear Naomasa confirm it. "Shouta told me some parts of it, but not all."

Naomasa gets out the folders he needs from his bag, not hesitating. "This isn't the time, Yamada."

"Yes, it is," the man argues simply.

The detective huffs. Yamada is always so difficult. It's funny that people always assume Shouta is the more stubborn of the two, when in reality he's actually quite easy going as long as you're not being an

idiot in front of him.

Yamada will keep nagging Naomasa about this if he doesn't get an answer this minute, so maybe it's time to share what he knows with the hero before him. In light of recent events, it's only customary.

But he still has to tread carefully here, as he isn't sure how much exactly Yamada knows.

Do Yamada and Shouta know about One for All yet? Should he reveal to them his suspicions about All for One's relation to Midoriya? That would require a whole lot of explanations—the kind that Naomasa is not experienced enough to even talk about. That's more of All Might's thing, and it's not like he can ask him to help explain.

Not when he doesn't want All Might to know either.

He's certain they're aware of the whole *he can take quirks* part of the situation, but it's likely they still don't know about All for One being a part of the reason why he can do it; they probably aren't aware of him at all.

Naomasa sighs and crosses his arms, using the papers he has in his hands to fan himself, as it really is quite hot in here. He may be getting sick. "It was random. I didn't choose to be on it; the situation just happened to fall within my jurisdiction."

"And what really happened? From my view, it's easy to see that all the papers entered into the system were botched."

His jaw clenches, stretching the skin over his cheekbones. He always hates talking about Midoriya's mother behind the kid's back. He feels like he's betraying him, even if it's not really a secret and even if he never made a promise to the boy about not speaking on it.

Naomasa's eyes slide away from Yamada as he remembers. "She went missing a few months before his sixth birthday. It was sudden, really. Neighbors said they heard her leave the apartment one night, but they didn't think anything of it. She was a nurse, so they just assumed she was called in late for an emergency. Except she didn't end up coming back."

The lines on Yamada's face deepen. "She left him in the house? At five years old?"

"We were only made aware of it when a few neighbors called in for a

wellness check. Bakugou Mitsuki called, too, saying the kid hadn't been to school or come over at all in weeks. She said that it happened sometimes, but usually Midoriya Inko would text or call her. Apparently, she hadn't replied to her for a while even before that."

He sees an interested spark in Yamada's eyes. "Mrs. Bakugou told us something similar a few days back. What happened after that?"

"We went to the apartment to check, and Midoriya was gone. There was blood on the floor and some splattered on the walls, and we identified it as hers."

Naomasa decides not to mention how there was also some blood that they *couldn't* identify, as it didn't belong to any living organism recorded at that time.

Yamada's face contorts into confusion, and Naomasa doesn't blame him. There's still a lot that not even *he* knows—and he's been combing over this case for years.

He lets the silence hang in the air for a few moments before continuing. "A man claiming to be Midoriya Hisashi called us the very same day, right before we were about to start the search. Said he went to check on his son and found him in the home alone. Apparently, he went to take him to his private doctor instead of calling in about the situation. That's why he waited so long."

"That doesn't sound right."

"I know. The entire interaction was suspicious. Everyone could feel it. Everything about it was off." Naomasa pauses, deep in thought. His hands ball together tightly, and his next words are bitter. "Long story short, Midoriya was soon dropped off at the station for a few days upon police direction before he was released back to his father." He shakes his head upon seeing Yamada's indignant expression. "We didn't have any grounds to keep Midoriya away from him. His father still had all the legal rights. What's even worse is we were forced to close the investigation on Inko after only a short amount of time." Naomasa thunks his head against the wall, relishing in the coolness. "He was eager for us to drop it. He kept making the excuse that dragging it all out would traumatize Midoriya even worse."

How could that ever sound like a concerned husband inquiring about his wife?

Naomasa sighs again, closing his eyes. "Obviously, we never found a

body, but they gave her a grave anyway because of all the blood they found. No one could've survived losing that much at once."

No one.

Yamada has been quiet for a bit, but now his jaw is set, emerald eyes turning flinty. "So, he did it?"

"I don't know anymore." Naomasa lifts one shoulder. "The kid admitted to me once that she was still alive, and my quirk didn't ping it. I know that people can bypass my lie detection if they truly believe what they're saying, but it was different that time. The investigation in general felt so wrong. Like we were missing all the important pieces. Why would he kill the mother of his own child? If he could've just taken Midoriya anyway? As I said, he still had all the rights. It wasn't like they were legally separated or anything. So, no, I wouldn't want to believe that he killed her. But that may be expecting too much out of a villain."

"The reports say there was a lot of alcohol on the scene," Yamada offers, but by the tone of his voice he doesn't quite believe what he's saying either. "Maybe one of 'em was intoxicated and it was in self-defense."

"I don't think he was there at the time she disappeared. But even if he was, he could've planted the alcohol there to make it seem that way. And besides, I doubt she could've been so volatile. The Bakugous were more than willing to provide information and cooperate. She was a loving mother, according to them. She very rarely drank."

"People are different behind closed doors."

There's a pause, and Naomasa concedes with a nod.

"The issue is that everything Midoriya Hisashi said was true. When he was being questioned, we didn't detect any lies from him. But I can't help but feel like I failed. She's one of the only cases I was forced to drop." It hurts worse because Naomasa was only *just* starting out as a detective during this time. Midoriya Inko left a bad taste in his mouth for years afterwards. "I failed both her and Midoriya."

And I'm still failing them.

"If he's as much of a problem as Shouta made it out to be, you shouldn't blame yourself. A villain with that kind of descent is bound to be more powerful than most of us can handle." Yamada is as blunt

as always as he continues. “Is that why you constantly watched over him? To make up for what you think you failed in?”

It’s not mean. Yamada simply wants to know.

“Partially.” Naomasa scratches the back of his neck. “Do you know how many times I had to save his ass from getting put in juvie? They were trying to send him to jail at one point for all the stunts he kept pulling. When he started staying out on his own, I guess he had no one to teach him how to act. I tried to smack some sense into him sometimes, but you can see how much that did for him.”

He sighs at the memories. On dozens of occasions, he remembers grabbing Midoriya by the arm and pulling him into his office after seeing him be brought in for yet another incident.

When he was younger, around eleven, Midoriya would listen shamefully to Naomasa’s hour long *scathing* lectures, and he would hang his head and promise to not cause as much trouble or involve himself with so much crime. But each time he came back, each time Naomasa revisited the same lecture with him, the less willing Midoriya was to listen to him.

And the more Naomasa’s worry and fear grew.

He knew, even then, that he was too invested in the Midoriya file. He cared far too much and distanced himself from Midoriya far too little. It was an unhealthy obsession, and it took up a lot of Naomasa’s free time outside of his cases.

Each time he saw Midoriya in temporary handcuffs, being brought in bruised and dirty and with that same tired grin on his face, his heart would drop. And each time, without fail, he would see a little boy, six years old, with dark bags beneath his eyes and clothes that seemed to swallow him whole, shuffling along after a social worker.

Freckles littered the boy’s bandaged arms and legs and creeped up over his neck to dust his cheeks, and it just made his sickly paleness even more apparent.

This was the first time he ever saw Midoriya Izuku. It haunts Naomasa sometimes, even now, as he’s staring at the kid’s sleeping form.

He can hardly believe how much time it’s been since then. Every waking moment was a struggle for Naomasa, and he can only imagine how it was for Midoriya, knowing what he knows now.

One day, when Midoriya was brought in for assault, Naomasa was so frustrated and *terrified* that he placed a hand on his shoulder and shook him a little, because the kid wasn't looking at him, and that wasn't acceptable—Midoriya needed to pay attention, because if he didn't, God, he was going to get himself *killed.*

And Naomasa didn't want to be the one to answer that call. He prayed every day he wouldn't.

But Midoriya slapped his hand off that day and told him that if he wasn't going to arrest him, he could shut the hell up already and stop wasting his time.

Just from that, Naomasa was truly tempted to call for an officer to place him in the back of a cruiser. *Would he be safer?* He always asked himself. *Would he be better off in a facility somewhere for troubled kids?*

He never got a clear answer. But what he does know is that Midoriya would've hated him forever, which would've had to have been fine. Naomasa doesn't need to be held in high regard—he just needs to do his job and keep Midoriya safe.

He needs to keep the promise he made to that boy's mother.

A week after that incident, Naomasa saw Midoriya again, but not due to a crime. Midoriya walked in the building and handed him a beautiful device made of various steel parts and machinery, proclaiming—in a rushed, awkward tone—that he was sorry. He bowed low and explained that the device was a high-quality digital forensic toolkit. It included specialized software and hardware for analyzing digital evidence like computers, smartphones, and other electronic devices—all of which Midoriya engineered himself.

At the moment, Naomasa didn't realize just how amazing it was, as he was still maybe a little bitter over their previous interaction and was high strung from a horrible week of work. So, he asked in a pretty sharp way if the kid stole the parts he needed to make it.

Midoriya froze in his explanation and looked away, cheeks reddening and shoulders hunching, which told Naomasa what he needed to know.

"Not all of it," Midoriya whispered dejectedly, and the look on his face immediately made Naomasa feel bad.

The detective sighed and decided to ignore the thievery part. He took

the gift and coaxed the boy up from his apologetic bow by asking him to explain everything the device could do.

It turned out that it had functions like data recovery, password cracking, malware analysis, data encryption and decryption, GPS tracking analysis, and social media content extraction. It could also analyze and interpret various file formats, communication logs, and metadata from hundreds of digital devices.

For a detective like Naomasa, it was like he hit the gold mine. Things that would once take hours of backbreaking work from Naomasa would now only take a quarter of that time. He was pleased and made sure Midoriya knew he appreciated it greatly. He said he would give him updates of everything he tried with it on the field, and he expressed how amazed he was by Midoriya's work.

And for the first time in a long time, Naomasa saw the boy smile shyly.

The point is, maybe it was really hard for Naomasa to come to a decision on whether or not to just take the boy in and lock him away. It was more difficult than it had any right to be.

Because sometimes Naomasa feared that if he did lock Midoriya up, the last remaining sparks of life in him would die out, and the world would never get the chance to see who Midoriya really was—a gifted, kind, and *intelligent* builder.

Someone who could create a real change in this world.

"Why didn't you ever stop him?" Yamada prods, and Naomasa knows what he means: *Why didn't you arrest him the very moment he started to be a danger?*

Naomasa doesn't hesitate. "The same reason Shouta never stopped Rabbit."

Before Yamada can respond, the doors to the hallway burst open, and Toshinori stumbles his way through in his deflated form. Naomasa realizes he must have already used up his time limit with all of the conferences and appearances he's had to do.

Naomasa clears his throat before turning to face the number one pro hero. For some reason, it's difficult to look him in the eye. Nezu's words briefly pop up in his mind, and he blinks.

Maybe before he wouldn't have hesitated in telling his old friend exactly what he's discovered, especially since it has to do with All for One, but right now?

What *would* Toshinori do if he knew?

Noamasa doesn't truly think he would ever hurt Midoriya just for being related to that monster, but when it comes down to it, Midoriya did lie to them. He knew the dangers of associating himself with All Might. He knew that the person who raised him was the very enemy of the quirk he accepted from Toshinori. He swore to use One for All to protect and save others, and all the while he knew of the centuries-old supervillain lurking all around him.

They thought All for One was dead. Midoriya knew that. And he said *nothing*.

Is it unfair to expect any different from a boy as desperate to do good as Midoriya? Is it unfair to hold him to that standard when he's still so young and unsure of himself?

Does it even matter when referencing such a powerful and destructive being like All for One?

Naomasa stares at the frail form Toshinori is exhibiting, thinking hard. This man is a hero. The very true essence of one, straight from the fairytales. He is so genuinely good, but he is also human, and Nezu is right.

While Toshinori may not hurt Midoriya, what would he be *tempted* to do? Deep, deep down in the crevices of his heart, what would that kind of betrayal cause him to think? Would he distance himself from Midoriya? Regret giving him One for All? Would he become more wary of him and want the boy to be closely watched?

Would he forever feel an unfair amount of bitterness towards Midoriya simply for the fact that he was raised as an extension of Shimura Nana's killer?

And does Naomasa really want to put Midoriya in that kind of situation?

He trusts Toshinori. He respects him. They've been friends for what seems like forever and Naomasa knows they'd both lay down their lives for each other in a heartbeat if need be, but still, *what if?*

Toshinori rushes up to them, sweating profusely. “I’m so sorry for being late,” he puffs out, slowing down right before them. “I wasn’t able to use my larger form to get here!”

“You didn’t miss much,” Yamada says first, pressing a heel against the wall as he leans back even further. His green eyes slide over to Naomasa. “He’s not awake yet.”

“I thought he wasn’t hurt?” Toshinori frets. “Why is he still asleep if the damages weren’t critical? His injuries didn’t come back from the fight yesterday, did they? Did Chiyo make sure to check his blood count for any more—”

Yamada groans loudly, rubbing his temple. “Dude, slow down. He wasn’t hurt much; he’s just exhausted. His body has been overworking itself for the past couple weeks, so he’s catching up on some much needed rest.”

Toshinori presses a hand to his forehead, releasing a quick breath. “I knew he was sick. He kept telling me he wasn’t, but he’s been having non stop migraines and aches for the past week and a half.”

“Aches?” Naomasa cuts in.

“His arms have been bothering him terribly—ever since Hosu,” Toshinori responds in a hushed tone. “He doesn’t ever tell me when it happens, but I can usually tell on my own. His palms hurt the worst most days.” His worried frown deepens. “The pain-relieving cream he was prescribed only works so well.”

Hearing this, Naomasa and Yamada exchange silent looks.

Toshinori glances between them and rubs an arm. “Can we continue this inside?”

Yamada waits for a second, as if thinking, before nodding and pushing open the door he was standing in front of.

Covered in thick white blankets, Midoriya is sleeping on his back, his hair moving slightly due to the air conditioner. There’s an IV hooked up to him, most likely providing nutrients and medicine to give his body a hand in healing him, but otherwise he remains untouched.

Naomasa’s eyes instinctively go to Midoriya’s palm, and he shows no outward reaction to what he sees. Instead, he stands off to the side with Yamada as Toshinori moves directly to his student’s side. He

touches Midoriya's forefread, shaking his head.

"I still don't quite understand how this happened," Toshinori murmurs, now brushing greasy curls out of Midoriya's face. "He was doing so well. How could this cause such an explosion?"

"Nezu kinda has a knack for that," Yamada says offhandedly.

Naomasa watches Toshinori and Midoriya's exchange and crosses his arms. "This was never unexpected. He was always bound to break under the weight of everything he was keeping secret."

The number one hero turns on him. "It was a journal. Yes, it was very special to him, but I fail to see how Nezu invading his privacy caused all of this." His sharp blue eyes narrow, and a surprising coldness edges into his voice. "Though I suppose there's a lot more to it than that, which is why you're here."

Yamada is quicker than Naomasa. "Izuku wrote a lot about his father." The detective's eye twitches at the second usage of *father*. He bites his tongue this time, as he has no reason to correct Yamada. "He did a lot of screwed up shit to him. Shit that Izuku obviously didn't want people to know."

Toshinori folds his lanky arms and doesn't move his gaze away from Naomasa. "That still doesn't explain why you're here."

A little surprised by the defensiveness from his friend, Naomasa lifts his head. "I know I've been absent a while, but I do care," he says evenly.

"You're on the job," Toshinori points out, always the keen one. It's what makes him a formidable hero. "You're here to do work. So, if you're not waiting to corroborate the things Young Midoriya wrote in that journal, I don't understand why you came at all. You're busy these days."

Naomasa straightens a little, realizing there must still be some stiffness between them since the last time they found themselves in a similar situation. "We all are, Toshinori. And I'm not the enemy here. You know I've always done everything with his best interest in mind."

"If there's something important to share about him or his parentage, I'd like to be made aware of it."

Standing in front of Midoriya's sleeping form, his back towards the

boy and his eyes glued almost accusingly at Naomasa, Toshinori looks like he's already decided who he trusts here.

And Naomasa is not on the good side.

Yamada, who has moved to lean against the middle of the wall and is staring in between them, scratches at his ear. "I think that'll have to wait until he wakes up, y'know."

Toshinori's expression sours. "I am always the last to be told things when it comes to this boy," he says, his words now carefully guarded. "I understand I'm not the one to house him, and I understand he's under your care, Yamada, but I would think this counts as a special circumstance. He was willing to injure Aizawa, so this concerns *all* of us."

"He's not in any legal trouble," Naomasa says, hoping he can make Toshinori settle down. What he means is *I'm not taking him away.*

He knows his friend is protective. He always has been. But somehow it's even worse when it comes to his successor. It doesn't help that Naomasa has tried in the past to open up the possibility of Midoriya having interacted with All for One before. In the hospital that day, Toshinori immediately shut the conversation down and grew angry.

Naomasa understands. He does. One for All is an important, tentative subject. So, naturally, anything to do with it, or, more specifically, anything to do with *Midoriya,* would be something Toshinori is careful about.

The man doesn't respond for a few moments. He is wearing a striped suit that is much too big for him. Here, at this moment, it just makes Toshinori look even more desperate. "I don't believe that's what I asked," is what he says, and Naomasa knows he's lost him.

Instead of responding, Naomasa turns to Yamada. "Where is Shouta now?"

"He wouldn't go home, so I made him go to his office to rest. It's not exactly safe for him to be anywhere else with his condition."

Naomasa's brows stitch together. He figures it's not a good idea to bother him right now. Yamada probably wouldn't allow it anyway. "We should talk when everyone is present," he decides, hoping this will tide Toshinori over.

The pro hero sits down haughtily in the chair beside Midoriya's bed. "That's not exactly reassuring to me, Naomasa."

Naomasa meets his flinty gaze once more, trying to calculate his next steps. The only thing he can think about is their last conversation.

"Toshinori. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The blond's words are withering. "What are you implying, Naomasa? This is paranoia talking."

Yagi Toshinori is the farthest thing from stupid. Naomasa knows his strategic planning and analysis skills are off the charts, so he knows without a shadow of a doubt that Toshinori is aware of all of the possibilities out there.

And that's exactly why he is being so defensive here. Naomasa can't let himself be offended by it.

"It wasn't meant to be," he says honestly, keeping his voice level.

Toshinori bristles, face darkening, but a sudden movement by Yamada has both of them pausing. The voice hero hovers over the side of Midoriya's bed, hand coming down to rest on the boy's hand.

Naomasa sees why just a moment later: Midoriya is twitching in his sleep. His face contorts into one of pain, and his eyes move rapidly from side to side beneath his eyelids. Small, quick movements of his fingers and neck let Naomasa know exactly what's happening.

His voice softens. "Looks like he's—"

"Dreaming," Yamada says, still focused on Midoriya. He doesn't wake him, of course, partially because Naomasa doubts he'd be able to anyway with how exhausted the boy's body is, but he still remains there by his side.

Toshinori makes a pitiful noise, seeming to sense things from Midoriya that no one else can. "Is there really nothing we can do?"

Yamada shakes his head. "Chiyo should probably give him another round of lorazepam, but other than that, we just have to wait it out. He should wake up soon."

"It's already been hours, hasn't it?"

"It's been a while, yeah," Yamada agrees. "But it's still within normal

ranges for the situation. As I said, he's just catching up on some sleep —we need to keep him as calm as possible, so we can't wake him early."

Toshinori's face screws up, watching the boy twitch a little more. "This isn't exactly calm to me."

A stone drops in Naomasa's stomach upon watching the entire interaction. Yamada and Toshinori converse with each other so comfortably and with great ease. It's almost funny, as Naomasa remembers the times when Toshinori would ask for Naomasa's help in making new friends and finding shared hobbies with the teachers at UA.

Looks like Midoriya brings a lot of people together.

Naomasa dips his head before turning on his heel and leaving abruptly. He can't stand in this stifling room any longer.

There's not much to do at the moment anyway since Midoriya is asleep.

So, going for Shouta next is the best option.

A day and a half is too long, isn't it?

Toshinori has slept for long periods before, mostly as a result of getting his ass kicked in a fight, but not like this. Something is wrong, he contends, yet no one is listening to him.

They keep telling him this is normal, that Midoriya will come to on his own accord. So, after a whole day of waiting in Midoriya's room, monitoring him even though the boy isn't going anywhere anytime soon, Toshinori has been kicked out.

And he finds himself where he always ends up after a tough battle.

Toshinori feels the wind in his hair and ducks down even lower, eyes squeezed shut. With his hands together, he kneels before his master's stone, his lungs constricting with each shaky breath. Here on this

meadowy hill, the air is chilly.

“He begged me to let him fight.”

His voice, lost to the wind, is the quietest it’s ever been.

“I know he’s strong; that’s exactly why I chose him, of course. But Master, as he grows stronger and stronger, I only grow weaker and weaker. He is draining me.” He wipes his nose on his sleeve, blinking back moisture. “Oh, he flies ahead of me now, and it takes effort to catch up. I am beginning to work slower, and people have noticed.”

His brows furrow, and when another cold breeze ripples through, he licks his cracked, quivering lips. Perhaps he should have brought another cloak.

“I am quite ashamed just to admit this to you, but sometimes I fear I have no chance at winning this without his help. And it’s so… *wrong,* yes, I know.” Toshinori chokes on a lump in his throat and presses a hand to his bloody mouth. “You forbade me to fight with you in your last battle and I was even older than he is now. It isn’t right of me to even consider his pleas when he is still a young boy and I have yet to complete his training.”

He sinks even lower into the soft, grassy ground.

“But All for One is back, Master, and I don’t believe I can put him down. Not again.”

He sits back on his heels, and he’s not successful in blinking back his tears this time. On this hill, miles away from the city where he first met Shimura Nana, he feels so inexplicably alone. Even in his deflated form, his shoulders are heavier than ever before.

“You told me that the past users had to prioritize strength and power over personal relationships. They could never get close with one another, as was the nature of things back then. There was just no time for it, I imagine.” He tips his head back, feeling the sunshine warm his face and dry the salty tracks on his bony cheeks. “I wonder if it was ever hard for you, meeting me after everything you had to do. I could not have been as strong as you, Master. This boy has only proven this to me.”

Branches rustle and sway, and leaves drop down to catch in his dandelion hair, gently caressing his skin and hands.

With nothing left of her to bury after her death, the only thing that remains of Shimura Nana is this unmarked rock in the middle of her favorite spot to float by. Toshinori moves forward once more, pressing his forehead gently into the bushy grass and flowers surrounding her empty grave.

“If I let him come with me to fight, and he falls, I know I cannot stop. I won’t be able to. Not if All for One is still alive at that moment. Despite everything, I’d have to keep moving, just as I did when it was your turn to die. But I…” He swallows, and his tears sink into the rich soil beneath him, reaching a body that is not there. “I don’t think I could bear to do that a second time. Forgive me, Master. I believe I have failed you yet again.”

With his lungs squeezing painfully in his chest, Toshinori prays. He keeps his head down, breathing in the scent of the earth and flowers, and clings onto the image of her in his head.

“Please help me guide this boy so I don’t lead him to his death. I can’t allow him to die before me.” He breathes out wetly. “And if my dear friend’s visions were right, as they always are, I beg that this boy won’t have to witness my end. Let him have the strength he needs to do what I could not and move on.”

I must speak with you, Young Midoriya. I need to. We have much to discuss… and we cannot afford to lie to ourselves any longer.

There’s a *woosh* of air somewhere behind him, and familiar boots strike the earth. Toshinori immediately straightens and lifts his head, scrubbing the tears off his cheeks even though there is no reason to hide them from his teacher.

They’ve known each other for decades now: they are far past the times where Toshinori would rush to hide his more emotional feelings after his master’s untimely death.

He clears his throat. “Have you come to see her, too?”

“No.” Gran Torino walks closer, his yellow cape swishing in the long grass. “I came to tell you the kid is awake.”

Toshinori’s neck quietly literally cracks with how hard his head snaps back. “What?” His breath leaves him all at once, and he’s on his feet in a second. “Why didn’t you call? You came all this way just to tell me physically when—!”

He sees the hit coming and could, in all senses, dodge. He sees the glint in Gran's dark eyes and feels the sudden tension hanging between them. He has plenty of time to counteract or move away, but, with years of brutal training ingrained in him by this man, he doesn't.

The superpowered kick sends him falling back, and he twists so he lands on his hands and knees with his master's gravestone somewhere off to the side. And it's such a familiar position that Toshinori can't even turn on his teacher. This is all ironic in all the wrong ways.

He wipes his mouth and sits back on his legs. "I don't suppose you'll tell me what that was for."

"You're just as self-sacrificing as ever. Stop shouldering the blame for things that haven't happened yet." Gran stalks past him to look out over the hill and into the city. A scowl is permanently marked on his features, and his brittle hair moves like seaweed in the wind. "And for God's sake, clean yourself up before going to him. That brat will have another meltdown if he sees you were crying over him."

Toshinori doesn't wait for Gran to say anything else. He rushes down the hill, heading for his car. He cannot shift into his larger form, as it would hurt far, far too much. He has already been straining himself for too long this week.

Uneasiness settles over his skin as he makes his way as fast as he can to UA. He can't help but recall Naomasa's words, and his hands tighten over the steering wheel. There are so many things Toshinori needs to take care of, and starting with Midoriya is number one on that list.

He is his mentor, teacher, and predecessor. It is his *duty* to help Midoriya grow and flourish. He is also supposed to guide him and help him through the consequences of his actions.

More than anything, Toshinori's job is to make sure Midoriya will never feel like he can't open up to him or trust him. Because when it comes down to it, Toshinori will always believe this boy.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Toshinori prepares for a hard conversation with his successor.

Chapter End Notes

me after upping the chapter count bc im bad at math: □

what’s funny is im also a math major

izuku rlly makes me think about what was i made for - yt

e

ready

Chapter Notes

> i am haunted occasionally by the ghost of what izuku could've been in this fic.
>
> cw: references to opioid overdose and underage drinking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku holds a heavy journal with shaking hands.

It is rough around the edges: torn, cracked, and reeking of smoke. It has served him well for most of his life, but it is not his anymore.

A day ago, maybe, he would've considered it as one of the few things he truly owned. But he can't say that now. How can it be his when all of his bleeding words have been accessed by someone else and spilled to anyone who cared to listen?

He has been sliced open and gutted, and his insides have yet to be returned. Maybe they never will.

Izuku can't even claim to have a story that belongs solely to him. Everyone else knows it, so everything Izuku has ever experienced is a shared reality.

He can no longer pretend that it was something other than it was. He can no longer hide the memories at the back of his mind and kick them away when the days grow too long to bear.

Izuku is in the corner of a cold room in the nurse's wing, hidden away from anyone who walks in. With his back against the side of the bed and his face nearly pressed against the wall in front of him, he is taking up as little space as possible.

Aizawa must have carried him here, as Izuku doesn't remember this place.

His grip tightens on the journal. His body is screaming at him, as whatever medicine he was put on before has long since worn off, especially since he ripped out his IV accidentally when he woke in a panic.

He trembles, shoulders shaking uncontrollably. He was changed into a thick hospital gown sometime during his bed rest, and normally Izuku would be a little upset by that, but now he doesn't give it any more than a second of thought.

The storm has ceased, and Izuku wonders when exactly it happened, for he can still feel the harsh winds howling in his bones.

He woke up just a few minutes ago, and he's alone. But he knows he won't be for long.

The journal burns a hole in his chest where he clutches it. He grits his teeth and opens it then, scanning the tainted pages. He sees sketches and ink blotches and scribbles and white fur and *terror* -filled paragraphs, and bitterness wells up within him.

He grabs a page and tears it. He lets it go and goes for another one, this time grabbing a handful. The terrible ripping noises continue to fill the air, and Izuku focuses on them as he continues to crumple and tear and throw. The pages flutter down like slow snow, littering the small area around him.

As he tears apart his beloved journal, he can see the remnants of hundreds of sketches from months ago. He spots a scribbled out drawing of his mother, and he only tears with more vigor.

His breathing picks up, and his eyes burn. Izuku feels maimed from all these years of playing too hard at becoming something he is not. He just wants to be his mother's child, and no one else's. But All for One's lingering presence reminds him, again and again and again, why he will never be that. Why he never was.

Izuku clambers into bed and watches the door, counting the seconds until she comes home. He listens for her soft footsteps, muffled by thick socks and a fluffy carpet, and waits for an even softer smile.

She opens the door to his room, and Izuku lies as still as possible, pretending to be asleep. He does this every night without fail, and every time, his mother plays along.

Settling on the edge of the bed right beside him, she wipes away a speck of dirt and thumbs his cheek with a light touch. She whispers his name lovingly, and Izuku doesn't answer because he is supposed to be sleeping. It's how the game works.

After a few moments, she turns and stares out the dark window, and Izuku

cracks open an eye to look at her, smiling beneath the fabric of his comforter. It's as if she has satin braided through her hair and silk as her clothes. Time stands still, and the rain stops its pitter-patter on the glass.

His mother is his everything. Since the day he came into this world, they've only had each other. She is all Izuku knows, and Izuku feels he could not be luckier.

To him, his mother can do no wrong.

She glances back at him, and Izuku shuts his eyes tightly then. A soft laugh escapes her, and she whispers something like, 'oh, Izuku,' before brushing back his curls and pecking his nose.

Every night, she sees he's awake. And every night, she says nothing of it, if only so they can continue their act for at least a little longer.

Amidst the flurry of shredded pages, Izuku grabs the ruined sketch of her and holds it tight, chest heaving.

He can't even look back at these memories in anger. He wants to be angry sometimes, truthfully. But he can never bring himself to be. His mother loved him before she didn't, which means the mistake must have been him.

At the beginning, All for One assured him he did nothing wrong, but as the years passed and Izuku grew, he began to implant those seeds of doubt in his mind.

Izuku's self-hatred doubled between the ages of eight and nine, and since then it has only been increasing. He likes to think he got better in the past year, ever since Aizawa and All Might, actually, but now he's less sure.

At ten years old, Izuku thought he could escape his father. But he wasn't listening to All for One's voice speaking through his mouth. He didn't see how his gestures mirrored his. He didn't see him in the way he held himself, in the way he spoke his own name. Izuku didn't hear the whisper of him in his blood, but that does not mean his father was not there anyway.

While Izuku is not physically with him anymore, a part of All for One will always reside within him.

Someone is approaching. Has been for a good minute now; Izuku has just been too preoccupied to think about it.

It's a school day, so the buildings are filled with hundreds of quirks and emotions. If Izuku focuses, he can sense his teachers in their respective classrooms, and he can pinpoint the exact location of his friends.

It's too late to prepare or hide the evidence of his desperation and guilt, though, as the door to the room opens and the person walks right in.

Shame hits Izuku in the gut, making him want to vomit, and when Yamada comes around the corner—dressed in casual clothes, not his hero costume—he wishes it could have been anyone else.

His teacher's mind is guarded—blocked by a thick wall that Izuku is not strong enough to break down right now. His emotion-sensing quirk, Link, cannot work with just how *hard* Yamada is trying to force himself to remain calm and neutral.

Which means Izuku is in trouble.

He meets his ringed eyes on accident, really, and just as quickly looks away, feeling like an injured hare locking gazes with a wolf in the distance.

Izuku struggles to use Pull and Black Whip to bring the torn pages back to him, collecting them into a haphazard pile. *I'm sorry,* he wants to say. *Just give me a second. I'm picking it up. The floor will be clean. I'll fix it.*

Yamada doesn't say a word. He only watches as Izuku uses the bed railings to pull himself to his feet. His leg gives way, and he holds himself up as best as he can while he fixes his footing.

Some of the crumpled pages flutter out of his grasp, and Izuku tries and fails to grab them before they hit the floor.

"Leave them," Yamada finally says, and he sounds tired. Like he doesn't want to be doing this. Like he doesn't want to be here.

And Izuku obeys like he'll die if he doesn't.

Moments pass like hours between them. Izuku can't look at him, so he focuses on the floor, counting the barely-there scuff marks. Memorizing each ripped page like it's a puzzle to be put together.

He opens his mouth, knowing he should say something, realizing he is

supposed to start first, but nothing comes out. He knows how this looks. He knows how any normal person would react to what he did yesterday.

Izuku hurt Yamada's best friend, his partner, his husband—but maybe hurt is an understatement. He nearly fucking *blinded* him.

And he knew the risks, didn't he? That's the worst part. Some hidden part of Izuku figured that was one of the possible outcomes. And he still didn't hesitate.

His body burns with the shame of not belonging. Standing before Yamada, Izuku feels lesser than ever before. Izuku wants to tell him that he regrets all of it: his apartment fire, the never ending arguments and spats, the empty promises, Hosu, *this,* and everything in between.

He wants to make sure Yamada knows that he *understands.* Izuku knows how fucked up he his. He knows he's horrible, and he deserves none of the pity some of the others show him. He lets people down often. He distances himself. He switches back and forth from being bitter and closed off to explosive and dismissive.

Does Yamada know he regrets it? Does Yamada know that each time Izuku attempted to run, he hated himself for it and cursed himself in the reflections greeting him in every dirty puddle?

Why can't Izuku just be the kind of person that stays? Why is it so difficult for him to commit to letting himself be taken apart and put back together again by the people he trusts more than himself?

Izuku is, at the bottom of it all, not a good person. He was never a good son, never a truthful nephew, and is even less of a worthy successor . The word itself makes Izuku want to scream his head off. He is a successor to no one. He couldn't be one for Father, and he is only pretending, *wishing* he can be one for All Might.

Yamada told him that it would take a *lot* to make him truly mad. Izuku thinks wearily that this may be the one thing he was talking about.

"What if I do break your trust someday?"

"Well, trusting you is my decision, kiddo. Proving me wrong is your choice."

Izuku's heart constricts painfully. God, he never thinks about anyone

at all, does he? He thought he could fix things by staying beside his teachers. He thought he could get better.

But Izuku should've known from experience that if he wanted something badly enough, the very act of his wanting it was an assurance that he would never get it.

Yamada's chin raises just an inch, and this prompts Izuku to move.

Slowly, and with great care, Izuku lowers his head. He bends at the waist until he's at a near right angle, using the wall to keep him steady, and his eyes burn like there's dirt in them. He blinks away the resulting moisture and stares at the tile beneath his socked feet, holding the deep bow as best as he can.

Kurogiri had at least made sure he knew how to do this.

As if remembering to maintain the proper stance, Izuku takes his hand off the wall and places both arms flat by his sides, struggling a little but forcing himself not to fall. In this deep bow, Izuku once again attempts to speak, but he's not sure where to even start. A *sorry* won't get him anywhere. It won't change what he did. And Izuku doesn't think he deserves to be given even an attempt at an apology.

How condescending would that be? To apologize for doing something deliberately, knowing he would wound the other person? It wouldn't make sense, not to Yamada, not to anyone with a brain.

An apology is for mistakes. Like when Izuku realizes he is being too snappy for no reason at all: *Sorry, ignore me.* When he accidentally hits All Might too hard during a battle exercise: *Shit, sorry!* Or when he's avoiding Mitsuki's gaze after another night of deflecting her questions about Father: *I'm sorry, Auntie, I don't know.*

While Izuku regrets what he did, he knows that at the time, hurting Aizawa was not a mistake to him.

He is as guilty as it gets.

The voice hero steps closer; Izuku sees his feet shuffle forward. Yamada reaches for him, and his hand pushes him up by the shoulder. Izuku resists at first, but soon he is standing upright, forced to look his guardian in the face. He sees those familiar red, rectangular glasses. He notes the deep lines on Yamada's face and the discoloration across his skin. His hair falls in frizzy waves down his back, now without the usual gel.

For once, Present Mic looks defeated.

And Izuku wants to cry then. Because he knows from that look alone that he has lost a fundamental part of what was once there between them.

Yamada takes the pages and the other leftover parts of the notebook out of his hand, placing them on the bed, and when Izuku tries to bow again, unable to look at him for a moment longer, Yamada halts him. “Stop it,” he says, with that same honey-smooth tone he used on Izuku the first day he met him in that alleyway. Now, though, it just sounds sad and *wrong* when it reaches Izuku’s ears. He pushes Izuku up even more so he’s facing him fully, head raised, and the man sighs when he looks down at him. “It’s alright, I promise.”

Izuku’s eyes blow wide open. He stands there, silent, as Yamada puts a hand on the back of his head and pulls him in. He guides Izuku to rest his face against his chest, one hand on his back, just *holding* him, and Izuku doesn’t know what to do.

The walls around Yamada break a little, and his emotions leak through the cracks and fill Izuku’s mind. Disappointment chokes him, restricting his airways, and regret sits heavy on Izuku’s shoulders, keeping him rooted to the spot.

Oh, *God.*

“You don’t have to do anything,” Yamada says, as if he’s seen this kind of thing before, and Izuku can physically hear the way his lungs rattle as he talks. “No one’s blaming you right now but yourself. Settle down.”

A part of Izuku wants to say that’s a lie, because there’s no way that can be true, but Yamada doesn’t say things just to say them. Why would he lie to Izuku now?

“I’m not mad,” Yamada says, and it’s these words that make Izuku’s own walls crumble for the final time. “I’m just glad you’re still here so we can work through this. It’s about time we all got on the same page, right?”

Izuku waits and, when Yamada doesn’t show any sign of pulling away, brings his scarred arms up and fists the back of Yamada’s shirt. It’s Aizawa’s shirt, he notices. He’s seen the man wear it a few times before.

The boy clings to the fabric and doesn't want to let go. It feels cyclic, everything that's happening. Izuku often mourns over the things he destroys. He wants to stop and revel in the things he cultivates, he wants to take time from forever and enjoy it all—and sometimes he does. But then a moment later he is at it again with a knife like a surgeon.

He wants to quit it. He craves affection, he craves attention, but even the mere thought of someone caring sometimes makes his stomach churn.

And, fuck, he really is so sorry. The words spill out of him even though he promised himself he'd keep them hidden away, and he can't even keep up with himself. With his face pressed into Yamada, he can't hear his own admissions at all.

I'm sorry, Izuku thinks he says. *I'm sorry for not telling you sooner. I'm sorry for hurting everyone. I'm sorry for taking advantage of you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You were the first one to make me feel like someone other than myself. And I'm sorry for not being who you thought I could be.*

He repeats the apology until it doesn't even sound like real words anymore, until Yamada presses him closer and shushes him, holding Izuku steady as the boy begins to teeter on wobbly legs like a newborn deer.

"Son, you don't know what you mean to us," he musters. "I know I'm still new to understanding all that you've been through, and what you're going through right now, too, but I care, and I'll still be right here. You're not giving us up that easily, Izuku."

It's like Yamada is touching his soul through the hand on his back. Izuku knows how it feels—it's exactly how Kurogiri's cold, misty arms felt whenever he hoisted the boy up. Their hands are one and the same.

Yamada doesn't say anything more, but he keeps his hold on Izuku and doesn't rush him or pull away. He just lets his student clutch onto him.

And Izuku thinks, in the middle of his guilt ridden mantra, that this must be what mercy is.

Shouta walks into his class with a minute to spare, his hand shoved into his pocket where a vibrating sensor rests. Power Loader gave it to him to help with his vision problems, saying that the levels of beeping and vibrations will vary depending on the things in front of him and around him.

It was hard to use at first, but once he got used to the different settings, he thinks he's gotten a hang of it. He doesn't need someone guiding him around anymore now that he's got this thing.

Four beeps, equally spaced apart, and Shouta slows his steps a little as he comes upon what he knows should be his desk. The entire room is silent, as it always is nowadays when he walks in.

His students have learned by now that they need to be prepared for the day the very moment their teacher arrives, regardless of what time it is.

There are two short vibrations then, telling Shouta to begin moving to the right. He reaches his chair with only some difficulty, and he sits with a huff. When he turns to face where his students are seated, his face now uncovered since his long hair is out of the way, the class explodes.

Well, so much for well-behaved students.

"Sensei, are you alright!" Iida asks first, erupting from his chair.

"Woah!"

"He got hurt? *Again?"*

"Dude, that's so badass— *ow, Uraraka!"*

"Oh, God, Sensei is *blind!"*

Honestly, it's not like Shouta didn't know they'd react this way, though. He did just come into class wearing a *blindfold,* so of course they'd be concerned.

It makes him warm, in some odd way.

Having enough of the incessant screeching and high-pitched voices asking him what happened, as he's already impatient due to his pain and non stop migraines, Shouta lifts a hand. "Enough!" He

reprimands, and the room once again falls silent.

He takes a moment to rub his temple, trying to muster up the very last of his remaining patience. Nezu gave him the option of finding a substitute to teach class while he waits for his vision to go back to normal, but he declined.

He can't leave his class alone for more than a day without someone almost dying. That was proven just yesterday.

"I'm only going to say this once," he begins, "so if you aren't paying attention, it's your own fault. And I don't want to hear anyone continuing to talk about this after I'm finished, is that clear?"

A chorus of *yes, sensei'* s fill the room, and Shouta sighs. He wants to crawl into his sleeping bag right now.

"One: this is not permanent, so don't get excited. I'll be wearing this blindfold for a few more days at most. Two: it is not your business how it happened, so don't ask—and that includes asking Mic. The only thing you'll receive in response from him is detention." God only knows why his students all assume their other teacher knows everything about Shouta. Well. Perhaps it's because he does. "And three: if you think my predicament discredits my authority as your teacher, walk yourself to the Principal's office now to get it over with. Class learning will continue as scheduled. Now, are there any questions?"

There's a few moments of clothes rustling but otherwise no verbal response, so Shouta pinches the bridge of his nose.

God, these kids.

"I'm going to assume the silence means no one has any questions, not that all of you have just raised your hands as if I could call on you."

A few students choke on air, and Shouta promptly ignores them. He feels around his desk for a stack of papers Kan put on there for him, and his fingers twitch when he hears Kaminari whisper from the back of the class, "Geez, something big crawled up his ass this time. This is serious."

"Kaminari," Shouta calls, making the boy squeak. "Come to the front."

The blond groans quietly and makes his way up, but instead of being given a slip for detention, Shouta holds out the stack of papers to

him.

“Pass these out to everyone,” he instructs. “Each person gets two.”

“Yes, sir!” Kaminari says, relieved.

Trusting that Kaminari can do at least that, Shouta starts the next step. He calls Iida from his desk as well, and he waits until the boy stops right in front of him (he has heavy footsteps) before asking if he’s already read the chapter they’re covering today.

“I have, Aizawa-sensei! I always try to keep ahead by at least three chapters!”

“Good,” Shouta says, not surprised. Iida Tensei was the same way. “So you can help with today’s lesson. The outline I made should be propped up on the whiteboard; take it and write it out big enough for your classmates to see, please.”

Iida takes in a sharp breath, as if surprised by the new responsibility. It isn’t often Shouta allows students to participate in the actual teaching of his lessons. Today is just a special case.

Shouta addresses the rest of the class. “Starting from page ninety, we’ll read aloud the first section by paragraphs, beginning with student number one. Afterwards, you’ll work on the assignment Kaminari is passing out. You can collaborate with your neighbors if you like, but keep the noise down. You’ll be turning in what you have by the end of class, no exceptions.”

“How is he going to grade it, though?” Sero quips quietly, not that it matters; Shouta’s hearing has only heightened with the loss of his vision.

Muffled sniggering arises, followed quickly by a few harsh shushes from other students.

Shouta leans back in his chair. “That doesn’t sound like books being taken out. If I have to tell you again, Sero, you’ll be seeing me after school.”

“But *you* won’t be seeing us,” Ashido giggles, sounding as though her hands are pressed against her mouth.

Of course, Shouta has to take back everything he said before about his students maturing. After twenty minutes of dealing with his stupid

class and doling out a week's worth of detentions, Shouta can finally relax a little now that everyone is mostly focused.

Halfway through the lesson, when everyone is quietly doing their assignment (much to Shouta's surprise), Uraraka politely calls his name.

"Sensei," she begins, sounding just a little worried, "Deku is absent."

Shouta doesn't outwardly react for a second. He wants to say sharply that he *knows* that, but he doesn't, of course. She is only trying to be helpful, as the fact of the matter is he can't see—she probably thought he just assumed everyone was present for his attendance records. "Thank you," he says with a nod, "I've already set the assignment aside for him."

That's the wrong thing to say. He realizes it right after the words leave his lips, because the way he said it made it seem like he already knew prior to class that Izuku wasn't coming.

Uraraka asks awkwardly, "Um, did he say why he wouldn't be here?"

Ugh, Shouta should've just said *thanks* and left it at that.

The sound of pen and pencil scratching against paper ceases entirely, and Shouta can almost *feel* the collective interest in the class rising exponentially—and not in a gossip-like way, but a genuinely curious one.

Shouta almost wishes Izuku was snooping in the vents this time around—that way he'd be able to see just how much of an influence he holds over his classmates.

Taking a second to formulate a response that'll be the least worrisome, Shouta hums. "His business is his own," he reminds, though not unkindly. "If you'd like to ask questions, I advise you to go to him personally, as I wouldn't be able to tell you."

A few moments of silence passes, and for a split second Shouta thinks she's going to ask something else, but she doesn't. She just mumbles an affirmation, and the class slowly goes back to work.

It's not the end of it, though—not that Shouta thought it would be. When the bell rings for a quick break, all of the students rush out into the halls, heading for lunch and fresh air.

All but one, that is.

Bakugou doesn't move from his seat until everyone else has left; Shouta hears his chair screech when Bakugou finally stands up and shoves it back in.

"Where is he?" Bakugou asks, looming in front of Shouta's desk.

Shouta continues packing up slowly. "Where's your paper? I said it was due by the end of class."

Bakugou scoffs and slams the paper down before him. "I know you know. What the hell's wrong with him? He's not answering me. He *always* answers."

Thinking for a moment, Shouta pulls out Izuku's phone from a hidden pocket in his bag and holds it up in the direction of where Bakugou is standing—an explanation.

Bakugou's harsh demeanor wavers immediately. "Is he—"

"He's in the infirmary recovering. He's asleep right now, but he'll be fine. I just can't let you see him until after he's been cleared."

"What happened?" He asks, breathless. Shouta hears the note of fear in his voice and forces himself to be patient.

Sighing, he reaches forward with great care and uses Bakugou's voice as a way to find his shoulder. He gives his student a quick squeeze, half-comforting him and half-warding him away. "It's just as I told your classmate: you'll have to ask him yourself." He tips his head forward. "I'm willing to bet you'd get more from him than anyone else, anyway."

He turns away and heads for the door, wanting to check the status on the orders he recently placed through his agency.

Three beeps this time, and Shouta shifts a little more to the side to open the large door.

"He did that to you, right?" Bakugou calls, and his voice is back to being gruff. Shouta's hand pauses on the door handle. "Your eyes."

Shouta lets the words settle over his skin as he tries to figure out the best way to approach this. Bakugou has always been intuitive—he's one of the smartest in the class. And due to his close relationship with

Izuku, it's not a surprise he'd be able to guess the connection between Shouta's new injury and Izuku's absence.

The man wonders if Bakugou knew it was Izuku's fault because of the time the boy used his forced quirk activation power on him during the Sports Festival. Now that Shouta has experienced it himself, it's safe to say he's even more empathetic. *It burned my entire body like I was being dipped in acid and strung out to dry. It was as if my nerves and spinal cord were being ripped out from under my skin. Did it feel like that to you?*

Or maybe Bakugou only put the pieces together because Izuku has talked with him before on the possible effects of using it on Shouta.

His hand tightens around the handle. "Bakugou." He throws his head over his shoulder. "You should quit asking things you already know and focus your efforts on what you can do to further improve yourself. Do that, and you'll make the ranks just a year after graduation. It's happened only once before, but I expect you'll be the second."

Shouta doesn't have to tell Bakugou who the first person to do it was —anyone would be able to guess.

Before he walks away, Shouta wonders if he should ask Bakugou about Izuku's father. There's no doubt in his mind that Bakugou knows more about Izuku's past than anyone else, especially since he was literally a part of it, but would that even be appropriate? No, it wouldn't.

As his teacher, Shouta cannot ethically ask, not without another authority present. But what about as Izuku's *guardian?*

Would it be fine to ask Izuku's childhood friend then?

He shouldn't. He knows he shouldn't. Especially since Shouta is attempting to bring Bakugou *away* from the idea of worrying so much about Izuku. Bakugou needs time to focus on himself and his future. He cannot spend the rest of his time at UA with crippling anxiety trying to keep his friend from dying.

He's done a great job for years now, but it's time for him to let the adults do the work, just as they always should've been doing.

Shouta holds open the door for Bakugou, who trudges past him with grumbled, near incoherent complaints.

"Keep up with yourself," Shouta finds himself saying as Bakugou

stomps away. “You’re at the top of the school, so don’t let anything make you fall behind.”

“I know!” Bakugou snaps, but it has significantly less heat than when he answered Shouta before.

Shouta listens to him leave and lets the door slide shut, raising a hand to massage his eyelids beneath the blindfold.

Sometimes, once or twice, Shouta does genuinely entertain the idea of retiring his position as a teacher. But then he reminds himself that that means someone else would have to take his place and teach these kids—including Shinsou—how to survive, both mentally and physically, and the urge leaves him.

While Shouta doesn’t think of himself as a savior by any means, he knows he has a duty to protect the future of this world.

And that means making sure the future will survive long enough to become the present.

“Where did you get barbiturates?”

Izuku stares at the wall, not facing Recovery Girl even though she’s currently burning a hole in the side of his head. “A doctor.”

“You weren’t prescribed it,” she says, crossing her arms. Her coat makes a crinkly sound; it was freshly ironed. “Not legally, at least.”

The boy shrugs. “I need it.”

“Well, of course you do. It’s an addictive drug.”

Izuku glances at her. “How did you know I take it?”

“I did a blood screening,” Recovery Girl responds casually. She uncrosses her arms, and her cane taps on the floor a few times to a rhythm that doesn’t exist.

“While I was asleep?” Izuku asks, frowning.

“You were unconscious, boy. You weren’t able to be woken at the

time. I needed to see what drugs were in your system before I administered heavy medication, so I got consent from a guardian."

At this, Izuku's face sours a little. He wipes it away just as quickly, however, as Yamada is sitting in the chair beside his bed, brows furrowed while he listens quietly.

Recovery Girl moves closer, her voice a little harsher. "Do you want to know what other drug I found?"

It's a hypothetical question, Izuku tells himself. He knows he shouldn't answer, so he doesn't.

"Dextropropoxyphene," the woman enunciates.

Izuku only blinks, but Yamada immediately sits up straighter, more alert now that he's heard the name. "That's a mouthful," Izuku whispers.

"Tell me something," she continues. "Do you like playing games with your life?"

Yamada speaks before Izuku can. "You found *both* traces?"

Recovery Girl hums in affirmation, leaning back in her stool. "He takes them at the same time, it looks like. Along with the medication I already prescribed him."

The voice hero whips around to stare at Izuku. "Son, you *can't* mix drugs like that. Especially when one is an opioid and the other is a depressant. Do you know what happens when you do that? And when you add alcohol to the mix, too?" He's so baffled that he doesn't even give Izuku a chance to respond yet. "I coulda sworn you already knew that. What made you think taking them together was a good idea?"

"I don't drink anymore," Izuku reminds, trying to sound confident despite the fact he's becoming embarrassed with Recovery Girl there. "I only started taking them a month or so ago, and I—I had cut back on the—on the, uh, drinking by then."

Yamada's lips press into a thin line. "Where are they?"

"What?" Izuku's heart drops.

"You keep them at the apartment, right? So, where are they? In your closet? The dresser?"

Izuku fiddles with his hand. “Yama, I really do need them—please, *please* don’t take them away. I promise I’m not addicted. I just *have* to take them.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you need them,” Recovery Girl cuts in. “I’d like to hear why from you, though, just to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

With both Yamada and Recovery Girl waiting for his response, Izuku’s shoulders rise a little. “I take the barbiturate as an anxiolytic and, um, anticonvulsant.”

“For seizures?” Recovery Girl clarifies.

Izuku nods. “And for neuropathic pain. It stops neurons from firing excessively and traveling to the brain whenever I get muscle spasms. It’s so I won’t, like, get permanent damage.

“And the opioid?” Yamada prods, his voice carefully controlled now.

“Just for pain. It helps my upper respiratory tract, too, I guess.”

It’s why I don’t cough so much blood anymore—not just the fact I’ve been using Extract more often. It acts as a stronger preventative and treatment plan for sicknesses.

Recovery Girl tips her head. “The person who gave you these—are they licensed?”

Izuku chews on his lip uncomfortably. “They were.”

Yamada breathes out heavily. “I don’t think that helps, listener.”

“He’s good at what he does,” Izuku says, maybe a little snappily. “And he knows what he’s doing. He’s been treating me since I was little.”

Recovery Girl’s interest grows. “He was your pediatric physician?”

“He was hired as a private doctor. Gave me most of my shots and stuff.”

Yamada’s eyes narrow. “If he’s a real doctor, why would he prescribe you an opioid with another drug? That’s dangerous.”

“Normally, I would say that his metabolism is high enough to bypass most adverse reactions to taking both together, as with most enhanced individuals.” Recovery Girl gives Izuku a suspicious look. “But in this

case, the actual *amount* he takes of each is what worries me. For both, they're over the limit that even a mutant would be given. And that's what makes it risky."

Izuku turns back to his lap, embarrassed again. "I asked him to up it," he says quietly, wanting to defend his doctor's actions at the Club no matter what. "I told him I needed it, and he agreed."

"Even knowing the dangers?" Yamada presses.

Izuku doesn't respond. How is he supposed to answer truthfully? The doctor didn't want to listen to Izuku, knowing he could potentially overdose one day out of the blue, but he also knew, deep down, that it wouldn't matter.

"Why?" He asks, and he's not looking at Izuku.

Izuku coughs into his palm, his chest rattling painfully as blood coats the insides of his mouth. "It hurts."

"It's going to. And why does it matter? You've had worse."

Izuku takes the wipe from him gratefully. "I know. But I can't keep going like this. How can I do my job as Rabbit if I have to keep stopping mid-fight and cleaning out my mask so I don't suffocate?"

The doctor stares at him then, and his eyes pierce into Izuku's, who holds the gaze tiredly. After a moment, the man replies: "You know this won't cure anything. You may just kick the bucket if I up it any more."

The boy only coughs again. "I'm dying anyway. I don't care."

The silence that stretches between them is heavy with many emotions. His doctor thinks for a moment and then turns his back on him, still not saying anything.

Izuku speaks so softly he's afraid he won't be understood. "I just want to be comfortable. I've already got enough shit going on."

It's selfish, is what it is. Izuku knows this. The doctor must too. But Izuku remembers nights when he was seven years old and clad in nothing but a sheet, shaking as he sat on a metal bench with Kurogiri watching from the side.

His doctor would step forward with a needle full of drugs of his own creation, his brows knitted together in desperation.

He would tell the boy in front of him that this will help. He would tell him that the pain and itching will go away after a while. That the aches and hysteria and voices will subside. Just one more try. One more dose.

He would lie.

And Izuku wouldn't realize it until much later. He would only accept the words with glassy eyes, red from crying in secret, and hope that this time would be better than the last.

Some years have passed since those times, and that very same doctor is sitting before Izuku now, shoulders hunched and skin made up of deep, ridged scars from his failures, frustration etched into every corner of his being.

Here he is, attempting to fix the same problem that began back then, only now it's worse.

And Izuku could never blame him for it. He's already come to terms with it. It is the fault of no one. But it's obvious the man thinks otherwise.

His explanation doesn't do much, in all fairness. His doctor was writing the new order out the moment Izuku walked in the door. He didn't have to explain himself, because the doctor understands this more than anyone else.

Not that Izuku has to know.

The boy nods. "Yeah," he says quietly. "He did."

"What happens when you stop taking them?" Recovery Girl asks, peering at him above her frames.

"It can be difficult to function." *Understatement of the year.*

Yamada is the next one to question him, thankfully not sensing that Izuku left something important out. "How much longer are you supposed to take them for?"

"I don't know. Forever."

Recovery Girl writes something down on her paper off to the side, and Yamada moves even closer to Izuku, his knees knocking against the side of the bed. "That's not possible. You can't take opioids forever. There has to be something that can be done, some way to make it so you don't have to take them."

“Yamada,” Izuku says, and he pauses until he feels the words buried in his throat come to his mouth. “This was really the only option. He—he’s been trying to find some other way to help, but it’s like I told Recovery Girl and All Might: I was born this way. It’s just gotten worse recently, that’s all. It makes some things difficult, but I’m fine.” He waves it away. “I’m sorry. I don’t think this really matters.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” Yamada corrects, eyes flashing. “To you, a lot of things don’t matter, right?”

The words, though not said harshly, still hurt. Izuku backs down quickly, realizing that even though Yamada is not his legal guardian, the man still has the right to act like it in regards to medical treatment.

Perhaps sensing the disconnect, Recovery Girl speaks again, now observing Izuku fully. “Does this have anything to do with the recent conversations you’ve had with Yagi?”

Izuku begins to feel a heavy hand wrap around his mouth, but the determined eyes of the man in front of him free the words long hidden. He knows what Recovery Girl is really asking, and he is grateful for her being lowkey, but right now he’s just so overstimulated he can’t be bothered to care anymore. “No. They, uh, have nothing to do with One for All. They’re not for it.”

As expected, Yamada jumps on the name immediately. “What’s that?” He looks back and forth between his coworker and Izuku the longer the silence stretches.

Recovery Girl turns away without another word and continues her paperwork, shaking her head. Yamada directs his attention to just Izuku then, who meets his gaze cautiously.

With his stomach doing flips, Izuku swallows hard. “It’s the name of my quirk.” He gives a short-lived, nervous smile. “One of them.”

“I don’t remember you mentioning it. Which one is this?”

“All Might’s.”

The room becomes so quiet that Izuku is bombarded suddenly with the sound of the air conditioning and the migration of students once the bell rings.

Yamada blinks, puzzled. “What?”

“It’s his quirk,” Izuku explains as simply as he can even though his heart is beating hard enough to make him jittery. “He—He *gave* One for All to me. So we share it.” Yamada still looks confused beyond belief, so Izuku finds himself gesticulating. “I ate his hair.”

“What?”

Recovery Girl snorts and rolls away to the side room. Now it’s just Izuku and Yamada, and the boy squints, realizing he just made things more complicated.

In an attempt to make it sound better, Izuku falls back to the science side of it. “One for All is able to be transferred by ingesting the holder’s DNA, so I had to, y’know, eat his hair follicle to get it. But it’s, um, actually kind of cool because it’s semi-sentient in that if the current user doesn’t *want* you to have it, you won’t get it even if you ingest their DNA. So, like, if I stole All Might’s hair without him knowing, and I ate it, I wouldn’t end up getting it. It’s like a built-in safety protocol, sorta.”

Yamada stands up and runs his hands through his hair. “Jesus.”

“All Might got it from his master, and her master from his, and so on. It’s a—a *stockholding* quirk, so it stores the blood of all—”

“Slow down, kiddo. Please.” Yamada cuts off Izuku’s anxious scientific rambling and sways a little, his brows knitting together. “So, you’re saying that one of your quirks comes directly from All Might?”

Izuku’s forehead creases a little. “Yeah. I mean, it’s not like it was a drug deal or something.”

Is the idea of a quirk being able to be passed on or shared *that* outlandish? Izuku grew up with the knowledge of One for All’s existence ever since he was little, and he was raised by a man who could take and give quirks at will, so maybe he’s biased, but he never really put too much thought into it.

“What does it do?” Yamada questions, now pulling at his lip.

Izuku is back to speaking softly, treading carefully. “What do you mean?”

“The quirk. You said it’s been passed down, and if it’s anything like how Yagi portrays it, it’s gotta be strong. Unless the one he uses is his original quirk.”

“No, All Might doesn’t—” Izuku quickly cuts himself off. He doesn’t think his mentor would mind if he told his coworker about his past quirkless status, but he figures that’s not his right. It’s not for him to reveal. “Actually, it’s a lot of things. It started from a basic enhancement power, kinda like one of mine. But it’s grown since then because it’s, well, a few centuries old now. It adapts to each new generation.”

Yamada mulls over this, obviously trying his best to wrap his mind around what Izuku is saying to him. “When did he give it to you?”

At this, Izuku hesitates, but Yamada wasn’t exactly asking so much as he was just demanding the background information, so the boy obeys. “A few weeks before school started.”

The look Yamada gives him makes Izuku’s insides shrivel up. “That’s why you made yourself that quirk suppressant,” he reasons, a lightbulb going off. “Because you weren’t used to the new quirk.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you guys for a while now,” he begins apologetically, “but I just wasn’t sure how to bring it up. I… I didn’t know what you would say.”

And maybe I was scared that if you learned of One for All, you’d learn of All for One too and be less inclined to skip over all of the warning signs.

Yamada sits back down with a huff. “Son, that’s the kind of thing you let other people know about, especially your teachers. But that’s not on you. I just would have expected Yagi to tell us once we became responsible for you. In order to best help, we should’ve been informed.”

Izuku shakes his head quickly. “No, no! That—That was me. He told me I should tell, but I—I just wanted to wait more. So that was my fault! Not his.”

“It’s alright, I’m not—”

“No, you can’t blame him for that! He was just making sure I didn’t feel rushed or anything. He wanted me to go at my own pace.”

Yamada studies him for a long moment before raising both hands slightly off his lap. “Okay,” he placates. “Alright. No one is blaming anybody.”

Izuku looks down. “Sorry. I was just hoping Aizawa would be here

when I explained this. And… All Might."

His voice tapers off at the end, and a crease forms between his brows. Now that he's thinking about it, he's not too sure he wants All Might to be here. Not anymore, at least. Maybe it's a good thing Izuku hasn't seen him yet. He's not in the building, so he's not currently working.

Where is he? Is he going to be mad? What does he know?

Aizawa said he wouldn't tell, but what if someone else did?

Yamada gives him a softer, imploring look. "Shouta should be here in just a minute since class is done, but do you want me to call Yagi?"

"You were never destined to have a choice in this part," Nezu explains regretfully, eyes full of pity even despite the air being forced out of his lungs. "You could not live a good life if you tried."

Izuku's bandaged hands clench, and he remembers the feeling of Nezu's tie in his fist. He recalls the weight of his body as he yanked him fully off the chair and held him up to garner his full attention.

Nezu is right, and Izuku knew it the moment he heard it. He can't avoid the truth forever. He always tried, but that didn't work out for him in the end.

But Yamada is giving him an option. So maybe, *maybe,* Izuku can put this one little thing off just a bit longer.

"No," he says, and his skin feels heavy all of a sudden, like a weighted blanket. "I don't want to see him. Please."

The voice hero nods, and Izuku knows he wants to ask more questions, but thankfully he doesn't.

"Alright," Yamada concedes. "But I gotta be honest with you, kiddo. I'm not sure how long we'll be able to uphold that."

"I know."

Am I being a coward? Should I just get it over with? Is there any easy answer to this?

The past users of One for All remain silent just as they have for a while now. He is not afforded their guidance.

When Aizawa makes his way to the room a few minutes later, Gran

Torino is with him, but Izuku doesn't pay any attention to him. His focus is on the blindfold concealing Aizawa's eyes.

A silent gasp tears through him, and he stares at the underground hero with a horrified expression. *No,* he thinks, panic spiking. *I thought it wasn't that bad. He could see, couldn't he? What happened?*

Yamada didn't mention anything like this, so there's no *way* Aizawa is blind, right? Oh, fuck. Izuku really did ruin his teacher's life and—

"Calm it," Aizawa orders, annoyed already. It's like he can sense Izuku's reaction without having to see it. "It's not permanent, so stop freaking out. If you even mention it, you'll be joining your classmates for detention."

Izuku sits up straighter, watching worriedly as Aizawa makes his way further into the room. "It got worse?" He whispers, feeling nauseous.

Aizawa huffs and sits in the seat Yamada leads him to. "What did I *just* say?"

"Erasure works, right?" Izuku presses, unable to stop himself. "I—I mean, it should return to you. You can use it later on? It's—this isn't —"

His large hand raises quickly, and Izuku instinctively shrinks back, wincing, but Aizawa makes no move to hit him. The hand stays in the air for a moment, and Izuku blinks before carefully touching the man's wrist, confused. Aizawa uses the touch to guide himself towards Izuku, and he rests his hand on the boy's curls.

Izuku, remembering how nice it felt the last time Aizawa did this, doesn't hesitate before melting into the touch. He closes his eyes, not understanding why Aizawa is comforting him this time around. Aizawa is the one who's *blind* right now, so Izuku doesn't deserve any of this.

Regardless, Izuku is so tired that he doesn't want to question it lest the touch is taken away.

Just when Izuku is about to ask Aizawa if his eyes still hurt as badly as they did a couple days ago, a sharp smack is delivered to the back of his head and he hisses, his eyes flying open in betrayal—but Aizawa is only just then pulling his hand away, his forehead scrunching in slight alarm.

And that's when Izuku realizes that it wasn't Aizawa who smacked him.

"Torino," Yamada warns, but he doesn't rebuke the older hero further.

The man has jumped up onto the end railing of the bed, and he crouches there precariously, a yellow cape draping behind him. His gloved hand is still outstretched, and Izuku glares at him, rubbing the sting from his skin and sulking quietly.

Knowing the position he's in, though, Izuku doesn't dare complain. He has to stop the pout from forming on his lips so as not to earn himself another smack.

"He still hasn't learned to listen," Gran Torino says as an excuse. He jabs a finger in Izuku's face. "If we're going to move forward, you have to *listen* . Things are gonna start moving fast, and we don't have any time to waste. That means no evasion, lies, half-truths, none of your *distractions* —none of that shit. Your teachers here are way past that, and I sure wouldn't appreciate hearing it either. Nor would Toshi."

The mere mention of All Might's name has Izuku's breathing speeding up. He moves his head away when Gran leans closer, and he mutters that he gets it.

"Really?" The old hero argues. "You'll hafta prove that to me."

"Hey," Aizawa cautions, looking in Gran's direction disapprovingly.

Gran throws up a hand in exasperation. "No point in acting like he didn't already know this would happen sooner or later. I've got no sympathy for him here."

I wasn't asking for any, Izuku wants to say, feeling a cold defensiveness rise up.

Instead of voicing this, he rubs his sides, and goosebumps appear on his skin. "What do you want me to say?" He asks him.

"I don't want nothing from you."

"Then what—" Black Whip erupts from Izuku's shoulder blades the very moment Gran grabs a hold of his wrist and yanks it close, and it takes a kind of herculean strength to rein the tendrils back in before

they make contact.

Yamada is on his feet in a split second, removing Gran's hold. *"Alright,"* he says shortly, "let's drop it."

Gran steps back, eyes narrowed, but Izuku's focus is on the large, stark white figure looming behind the hero.

Torn leather wings hang in the air, spanning out the distance of the entire room and then some, and Izuku stares into cloudy white eyes, frozen.

It is one thing to see his father's vestige within his realm—but it is an entirely new thing to see him in the living world. Izuku blinks, and then he's gone, just like that, but the tight feeling in his chest remains.

He isn't sure what Gran was going to do, but he doesn't care anymore. Black Whip was an overreaction on his part for sure, but he couldn't help it.

Yamada keeps his position in front of Izuku, face pinched as he tells Aizawa quietly what happened, and Izuku watches apprehensively as Gran follows where he was gazing a moment ago and only grunts when he sees nothing.

Izuku doesn't break away when Gran turns back to stare at him one more time. He hopes he's conveying his real feelings just through his eyes so Gran will leave him alone.

Not saying a word, the old pro hero shakes his head and hops off the bed, heading for the door—he came here for something and obviously got it, whatever it was.

Yamada's hand on his left forearm brings him back to himself. "If you keep moving around like that you'll disrupt the IV again," he says, fiddling with the tape on Izuku's wrist.

Izuku sighs quietly. "I don't need the IV."

"I don't care," Yamada remarks simply, sitting back down beside Aizawa after fixing the tube. "What Chiyo says goes, and she ordered me to keep it going until she gets back."

"It's not doing anything."

“It’s giving you fluids since you’ve been asleep for more than a day, so yes, you do need it.” Yamada crosses his arms with a huff. “And maybe she would’ve been able to give you pain meds that *work* if you told her before all of this that you already take barbiturates. She has to order specific drugs for you that she doesn’t have in stock here.”

“She shouldn’t have to do anything since—”

“Stop arguing,” Aizawa orders abruptly, done with listening to the exchange, and Izuku sullens.

“I wasn’t,” he mumbles, shifting so he’s turned away from both Yamada and Aizawa. It’s weird to have the two of them here. One lecture is plenty, but two? And coming from both his teachers? The only thing worse would be having All Might walk through the door with one of his Grade A *‘I’m disappointed in your actions’* talks.

Don’t they have something else to do? Aizawa was just teaching, so he should rest or at the very least take a nap. And Izuku is sure that Yamada has third year classes to prepare for.

Aizawa leans forward. “Are you still in pain?”

Hesitating, Izuku doesn’t turn or look back at him—he doesn’t want to look at either of them at the moment. “No.”

A finger jabs at Izuku’s turned cheek, right where Aizawa punched the fuck out of him, and the boy isn’t quick enough to reel in the pained hiss that escapes him. He jerks away, glaring at Aizawa’s finger accusingly and hating the fact that Yamada helped him do it.

“She didn’t heal your face?” Aizawa asks, frowning.

Yamada answers when Izuku doesn’t. “She didn’t want to heal him too much, as his regeneration can cover the smaller things while he rests. She did everything else, though.”

“Is the bruise still there?”

Izuku wants to say that that doesn’t matter in the slightest, as he deserved what he got and more, but he has the sense to remain quiet after remembering what Yamada said to him.

Upon Yamada’s confirmation, Aizawa shakes his head. “With Boost, it should be gone by now. What’s the matter?”

He directs the last part at Izuku, and the boy almost snorts. Does Aizawa really have to ask that question? Izuku is holding on by a loose thread right now. Any moment and he might just explode again, and he's not sure if he could stop himself this time around.

"Hey." Aizawa pushes at Izuku's shoulder, and the boy finally looks at him even though he knows it won't matter. "You're not injured badly, so it can't be due to malnutrition or overuse. It's mental, right? So, talk to me."

Talk to him. *Talk* to him? Izuku's lips part in surprise.

This is new territory with Aizawa. He's never been this open before. And while he does have *some* soft qualities to him depending on the time of day, the situation, his mood, and the positioning of the goddamn stars above, he's not usually like *this.*

Izuku is suddenly worried he hit Aizawa's head a lot harder than he thought he did with that knife. Maybe he fucked him up in the brain.

He swallows, tongue feeling like sandpaper. "About what?"

"What're you thinking about right now?"

Yeah, Izuku is absolutely floored. His eyes flit over to Yamada, wide and panicked, but Yamada is only looking at him, and he doesn't seem the least bit concerned about how Aizawa is acting. Maybe Yamada is used to this side of him, and maybe this level of *quiet* questioning is something he's all too familiar with.

I think you're spending too much time with the counselors, Izuku wants to say, but he doesn't.

He just shrugs. "I don't know."

"Give me anything."

"Kacchan."

Aizawa huffs out a disbelieving breath, giving Izuku hope that he's still the same old Aizawa. "Besides Bakugou."

"Gran."

"Ignore him," Yamada says, voice low in agitation. "He's obviously got his own issues, so forget about what he said."

Izuku fiddles with the IV again and presses on the tape. He shifts on the bed, bringing his knees back up to his chest. “I’m not really thinking of anything, then. I’m just…”

“Just?” Aizawa repeats, open-ended.

“Upset,” Izuku settles on quietly. “That you’re hurt. And that—that I—I’m the one who did it. I’m… I’m just sorry. That you all had to do what you did.”

“I think we’re over that now.”

“I’m not.” How could he be? “And you shouldn’t be either.”

“Kid,” Aizawa begins tiredly, “you gotta know when to stop digging the hole you’re in.”

Izuku hides his face in his knees, and when he closes his eyes, he sees blood running out of obsidian sockets. He sees a blindfold and bloody rags wrung out over small sinks, and he feels sick.

Yamada shifts the conversation elsewhere then. “Son, why don’t you tell him what you told me?” He prompts.

Ignoring the tightness in his chest, Izuku nods and begins to shakily tell Aizawa about One for All and his relation with All Might. And to his credit, the man doesn’t seem all that surprised.

Izuku guesses he already knew his and All Might’s relationship ran a little deeper than that of a simple mentor and apprentice, and besides, Izuku only began to exhibit those particular red sparks around the time he was officially associated with All Might through UA.

Their quirks are both major enhancements to the body, too. There’s a reason Todoroki was so adamant about his theory of Izuku being related to All Might.

Izuku keeps a close eye on the few emotions Aizawa is putting out through Link—there’s no anger, but there is firmness and something akin to apprehension, along with honesty.

“About those whips coming out of you,” Aizawa starts, “I’m assuming that’s what you meant when you said they were different from your other quirks.”

Izuku nods, relieved he’s taking this a lot better than he could be.

“Yeah. It’s, uh, actually a byproduct of One for All. Because it’s a stockholder, it stores the DNA of all the past users, which includes their quirk factors. Black Whip—that’s its name—comes from the fifth user.”

“How many are there?” Yamada asks.

“I’m the ninth. But All Might and I are the only, uh, current ones.”

Aizawa hums. “And I’m assuming Torino knows all this?”

“He was the friend of All Might’s master. He also helped train him at UA after she…” Izuku doesn’t have to say the rest; as heroes, Yamada and Aizawa can easily see where he was going.

“That’s the real reason why Yagi wanted you to go to him for your internship, right?” Aizawa says, less than amused. “Because of One for All?”

At this, Izuku can’t help but let out a genuine smile. “He didn’t actually want me to go to Gran that badly. He was kind of scared of him.”

Yamada matches his expression. “Can’t imagine why.”

Izuku explains a little more details about One for All and the transferring process, avoiding the topic of *why* exactly it was created in the first place, and who it was meant to counter. But thankfully they don’t question him on that, too stuck up on the whole *quirks inside a quirk* thing.

“Does Yagi have access to Black Whip, too?” Aizawa wonders.

“No.” Izuku rubs his arm awkwardly then. “I’m the only one to have been able to use a past user’s quirk. I don’t know why.” He stares at his lap. “All Might and I are still figuring that out.”

“The other quirks—do you know anything about them?”

“I haven’t really unlocked those yet. I—I don’t really get to choose which one I get or when I get it, y’know? I only manifested Black Whip during the dinosaur fight. I don’t even know if I *will* get to use the other ones. This is all new, at least for us. I don’t know about Gran, though.”

Yamada looks worried now. “Either way, they could be dangerous.

You could manifest one abruptly and hurt yourself or others. We need to be prepared for them to come in at any time."

"But you *know* about them?" Aizawa clarifies. "And what they are?"

Izuku is stumped for a moment. Yes, of course he does. But what is he supposed to say? He can't admit to Aizawa that the reason he actually knows about most of the past quirks is because he literally walks in the realm of dead people and talks to them.

Well, used to.

Biting the bullet, Izuku nods. "Yeah. I—I could write most of them down."

Aizawa sinks into his chair, as if satisfied. "Good. Get that to me when you can."

Feeling a little dizzy by just how fast the topic is progressing, Izuku allows himself a sliver of weakness. "Thank you," he says, resolutely avoiding their expressions. "For believing me."

Yamada laughs a little, the first to respond. "Kiddo, no offense, but I think this is too outlandish for even you to be able to make up on the spot."

"Yagi seems the type to pass a generational quirk onto some fourteen year old," Aizawa adds, his head tilted to the ceiling.

Izuku knows it's mostly a joke, but the defensiveness rises once again within him. "I already have an enhancement quirk, so he didn't think it would be anything too different from what I already have experience with."

Aizawa waves off the explanation, and at that moment the warning bell rings, signaling that the end of lunch time is near. Yamada grimaces and gets up from his chair.

"I have class, but I'll be back to check on you," he tells Izuku. With that, he squeezes Aizawa's shoulder once as a comforting gesture before leaving.

The boy isn't sure if it's better or worse now that it's just him and Aizawa.

"Do you know when you'll be cleared?" The man asks a few moments

after the bell goes silent, tone level.

“She wants to give me another round of healing before I can go.”

His tone must register as unenthusiastic, because Aizawa is quick with his response. “You don’t want her to?”

“It’s a waste of her energy. I can heal by myself.”

“She’s offering, so you should take advantage of it and give your body a break.”

“How many times did she try to fix your eyes?”

The abrupt question makes Aizawa’s brows fly to his hairline, and they peek over the blindfold. He rests an ankle over his knee and thinks for a second before replying, “Four.”

Oh. Izuku’s knuckles turn white with how hard he’s gripping the sheets. “Do they hurt?”

“Not anymore.” He points in his general direction. “But I’m serious here; don’t change the topic. You may not like it, but let the old lady do her thing. She knows what she’s doing.”

Izuku doesn’t argue. He just swings his legs over the side of the bed and wishes he could walk around somewhere. The IV isn’t long enough to do much of anything.

It’s Aizawa’s turn to ask an out of pocket question: “How long have you had the white hair?”

Izuku’s face snaps up. He’s about to ask how he knows about that when he realizes how stupid of a question that would be. He’s been asleep for over a day—they probably checked over his entire body for any underlying wounds or conditions and saw the patches of white that just won’t stop growing back in.

His foot bounces up and down with nerves, not touching the tile. “I only noticed it a month ago.”

“So, it’s not dye?”

Izuku’s gaze is fixed on the door. He feels two people entering this side of the building. His heart rate spikes just from their quirk signatures alone, but he forces himself not to freak out. Aizawa is here, right beside him, and that means something. “No.”

“Why didn’t you tell one of us? It could be a symptom of a sickness, Izuku.”

“I didn’t think it was important,” he murmurs. “My father has—he *had* white hair. I thought it was just late genes that were—were triggered by my quirk. My, er, original.”

“Extract?”

“Yeah,” Izuku says at the same time that the two newcomers reach the medical wing. He braces himself, and he doesn’t listen to what Aizawa says next when a knock sounds on the door. He avoids meeting Detective Tsukauchi’s stare when he walks in, instead focusing on the shiny floor beneath his dangling feet.

He knows what’s coming, of course. He’s been waiting for Tsukauchi to show up, as he knew he would sooner rather than later in order to get more information.

He prepared himself for it, especially when he was stuck inside his dreams for what felt like years, but with the situation finally coming down on him, he feels suddenly so much more afraid.

And the presence of Hound Dog walking in behind the Detective doesn’t help ease Izuku’s mind one bit.

“Shouta,” Naomasa greets first, making himself known. He closes the door with a quiet *click* when UA High’s counselor walks past him to position himself at the end of the bed Midoriya’s sitting on.

The hound hero immediately begins talking to the boy, all soft words and gestures, which means Naomasa is clear to continue with Shouta.

“I’m sorry to barge in,” he says, being careful to maintain a distance of five feet from both Shouta and Midoriya. “I know I talked with you before, but is this a bad time?”

Shouta lifts his head, arms crossing over his chest in what Naomasa would almost say is a defensive motion. “He woke up not long ago, so he’s still a little tired.”

“He’s healed, though?”

“Not fully. He needs—”

“Yes,” Midoriya cuts in, eyes shadowed. His gaze is on Naomasa, but not on his face. He’s staring at the man’s chest, and Naomasa isn’t sure if it’s out of fear, guilt, or both. “I’m fine.”

Shouta huffs in agitation, but he doesn’t comment on the interruption.

Hound Dog’s ear flicks, and he moves into Midoriya’s line of sight again to see if he’ll continue to talk to him for a moment, but it seems that Midoriya’s focus is mostly on Naomasa—and for good reason.

He’s not stupid, and Naomasa never thought otherwise.

So, not wanting to talk about the boy as if he’s not there anymore, he keeps his gaze on Midoriya and hopes his casual clothes denote a less professional attitude. The kid looks like a bus hit him, as he looks extremely exhausted—that is, even more so than usual.

“Hey,” he says, dipping his head in hopes of coaxing the boy to look at him. “How are you feeling?”

The top of Midoriya’s hair is pulled back in a small ponytail. It looks more like a bun with how curly the ends are, though. He’s dressed in a large, thin shirt—no doubt provided by the nurse. But besides the dark bags under his eyes and the dark purple bruise stretching from the side of his jaw to his cheek (a bruise Naomasa saw the last time he visited and assumed would have healed by now), he doesn’t seem injured.

Naomasa is almost impressed. He saw the footage of the entire incident from the moment Midoriya stumbled out of those vents to when Shouta finally brought him to the floor with the aid of his coworkers. If Naomasa hadn’t been involved with the Midoriya family for years now, he’s sure he would be somewhat scared of the boy’s abilities and sheer prowess.

It’s just as they’re taught in the academy: a cornered person is the most dangerous. This is why he needs to be very, *very* careful in this situation especially.

Midoriya lifts a shoulder slightly, not answering verbally. He’s likely waiting for Naomasa to take the initiative. He doesn’t seem to be in

the best mood, which is only logical, so Naomasa decides very quickly that he needs to skip any unnecessary questioning, as that will make Midoriya even more anxious.

He clears his throat and waits a few seconds, glancing at Hound Dog just to see if he's giving him any subtle cues, but he remains still.

Well, I guess we're getting right into it.

Naomasa shifts his weight onto his other leg. "I know this is fast, but I have to ask you before I do anything else: do you think you're up for a few questions right now?"

"A few?" Midoriya echoes. His body is poised tightly, matching Shouta's own defensive posture.

Hound Dog clarifies then, his voice a rumble. "Any that you are willing to answer, even if that turns out to be none."

When Midoriya eventually whispers his consent, Naomasa pulls the empty chair beside Shouta out into the middle of the room, keeping five feet away still. He sits down, knowing he needs to make himself look less intimidating.

Midoriya's eyes track him the whole way, and finally, finally, he meets his gaze.

"You know that I'm here to ask you a few things about what exactly the Principal uncovered from that journal," Naomasa starts, not beating around the bush. "But, son, I need to make one thing clear: you are not being detained, and you are not being arrested. You're not going anywhere, and that's a promise. No matter what, that's point blank, alright?"

Midoriya nods jerkily, hands wringing together under his blanket. "Okay."

"I'm going to be honest and say I'm not going by the books here, and I want you to realize that this is happening solely because I think you can help us with the investigations we're starting. What we're trying to handle concerns the safety of thousands, and I think you know what I'm talking about." Naomasa doesn't spare Shouta another glance even when he sees his intrigued look. "That's the major reason as to why this is happening right now. Does that make sense?"

Another nod, and Midoriya closes his eyes, probably in an attempt to

calm himself down.

Hound Dog sits on the nurse's stool, now at the foot of Midoriya's bed. "Would you feel more comfortable if Aizawa stepped outside?"

"I told him about One for All already," Midoriya explains, and Naomasa feels some part of himself loosen up at this knowledge, though that wasn't what he was worried about.

"I won't be asking about just One for All," he prepares softly.

Midoriya glances at his teacher, a crease between his brows as he struggles to decide what to do. Shouta thankfully smooths down any unhappy expression on his features, not wanting to influence the boy's decision. It also helps greatly that his eyes can't be seen.

With shaky breaths, Midoriya nods at Hound Dog, answering his previous question. "Please," he whispers, shame coloring his voice.

Shouta stands up without complaint, though his jaw is set, and Naomasa's stomach gives a slight jolt. "Okay," Naomasa says, and he places a hand on Shouta's shoulder to guide him to the door, but Shouta pauses, his body an immovable rock for Naomasa.

The hero finds Midoriya's head and rests his hand against the top of it, applying a little pressure—almost like pressing a button. Midoriya's head goes down a little with the force, and Naomasa watches with mild interest, surprised at how touchy Shouta has become recently. It's not like him, but somehow it doesn't seem too out of the realm of possibility.

Yamada has always been a person who values contact, so maybe Shouta is too but only in private. Or, the more likely reason is that Shouta sees and understands the boy's need for that sort of comfortable support now.

"I'll be outside," Shouta tells him, and he doesn't move away until Midoriya acknowledges him with a small *thanks*.

Hound Dog takes this time to talk to Midoriya more directly, and Naomasa blinks in surprise when Shouta pulls him so the door shuts both of them outside.

"How long will this take?" Shouta asks, and Naomasa is only thankful that the students are in class right now. This would be a nightmare during passing period.

“That depends entirely on how much he’s willing to talk about.”

“He’s pushing himself,” Shouta warns. “He’s struggling, but he doesn’t want to be the reason something bad happens, so he’s probably going to keep forcing himself to talk.”

“I know, that’s why I asked for the counselor to be present.”

“That won’t be enough to deter him.”

“Shouta,” Naomasa starts apologetically, “we have to do this sometime soon. You…” He hesitates but then forces himself to continue. “You haven’t seen some of the things that were in that journal. I’m sure he’ll tell you eventually, but right now—if Nezu’s theories are correct—we’re on a time limit. It sucks that we have to do this to the kid, I get it, believe me, I *know.* I hate hurting him like this. But if he’s willing to do it, I have to get that information from him. I *have* to.”

Since that monster is back, we have to know everything about him, and as of this moment, this boy is the only one to have been in such close contact with him.

His friend hears the urgency in his voice and accepts the words, as he backs off, leaning with his back against the wall. “I want to talk to you afterwards, then.”

Naomasa doesn’t argue. He agrees, hurriedly making his way back inside so as not to keep them waiting.

Hound Dog is closer to Midoriya now, and he doesn’t stop speaking to the boy when Naomasa comes back in. He’s laughing softly, leaning down even more so he’s lower than Midoriya is.

Naomasa doesn’t hear what he says, but it must be somewhat reassuring or funny, as Midoriya allows a small smile to slip through.

The detective hates to ruin that.

When Hound Dog pulls back, Naomasa hangs by the door still, thinking about the instructions the counselor gave to him previously on how best to approach this.

“No matter what you say in this room,” Naomasa starts, holding Midoriya’s gaze, “I’m not going to tell All Might.”

Midoriya shakes his head, as if not believing. “Why?”

For a long period of time, Naomasa is silent, just watching. He doesn’t want to say the truth, knowing it would only hurt, so he remains quiet. Not even Hound Dog cuts in, as he must know too that this is something Midoriya must come to terms with himself.

Izuku pulls his knees to his chest and leans against the wall, his body wracked with shivers all of a sudden. Naomasa makes a note to keep an eye on his vitals during this.

“He’d hate me if he knew, wouldn’t he?” He asks, all quiet and defeated.

Naomasa swallows. “I think it would take some time, son,” is all he can say.

Midoriya lets out a shuddering rush of air, looking more vulnerable than Naomasa has seen him in years. The boy looks back up at him with dull eyes after pulling himself together. “What do you want to know?”

The words feel like a pivotal moment. Like the moment before dawn breaks, when you’re just beginning to see the streaks of light peeking up from over the horizon.

“Whatever you’ll give me.”

“I’m not gonna talk about her.”

Naomasa knows who he’s referring to, and he sees the slight warning look Hound Dog sends his way, so he already knows how to handle that declaration. “That’s alright. I don’t need to know about her right now. I just need you to talk about *him.”*

Midoriya grips his thighs. Naomasa wonders if he does it for the pain in order to ground himself or if he does it solely to comfort any floating feelings inside his chest. He understands either way—he used to do the exact same.

The teen mutters an *okay,* or something resembling it, and the chains loosen around Naomasa’s lungs, allowing him to breathe easily again.

He sits down at that same chair, and Hound Dog takes an unimposing position beside him, already reminding Midoriya quickly about the contents and procedures of this questioning—making sure the kid

knows he's not stuck here and he's not going to be forced to do anything at this time, and that if at any point he wants to stop, they *will.*

He wouldn't even need to give a reason.

When Midoriya takes in a shaky inhale and scrubs at his face, whispering that he understands, Naomasa wishes he could tell him just how many lives he's helping to save by doing this.

And he wishes he could say just how overwhelmingly *proud* he is of how far he's come.

Chapter End Notes

so when i die, which i must do, could it shine down here with you?

this chap reminds me of post malone - hollywood's bleeding. in fact a lot of post's songs remind me of izuku funnily enough

anytime i write about black whip manifesting from izuku's back i immediately visualize ken kaneki's kagune

gran: *freaks izuku out on purpose*
afo's vestige: i sense bad energy, i must see for myself

don't worry, im going to provide more of a reaction on aizawa and yama's parts regarding the OfA reveal :) they're just a little shell shocked with everything else going on rn

g

too late, too early

Chapter Notes

> i've been editing the first half of this story again bc i wrote it in 2020 and desperately need to rewrite the entirety of the usj and sports fest. so beware of that in the near future
>
> also sry for the lateness. have a longer chap to make up for it
>
> this one is for cosmicsaturn!!! happy bday!! yay!
>
> cw: mild gore, ref to underage drinking and smoking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa stares into the eyes of a corpse, fur prickling, and he notices its pupils dilating when he crouches down near its head. He shines a light over the Nomu's smoking body, nose twitching at the acrid smell.

It may be dead, but he still has to be careful. There's no telling what last minute defenses this thing was equipped with before being sent out.

With over twenty legs jutting out from its elongated body, Sansa gets the feeling this creature was supposed to resemble a worm or some kind of centipede. The back end of it is still twitching and writhing, trying to regenerate even when there's no more life left in its body. Thick black blood spurts out from its multiple wounds, coating the cracked asphalt all around it. The head is smashed against the ground whereas the end is splayed on the top of a small building.

The size of the Nomu itself is massive, so it must've been absolute hell to take down; Sansa's ears flatten in silent respect upon glancing at the two heroes responsible for neutralizing it. They're currently being taken on stretchers to be transported to the nearest general hospital, both having fallen unconscious shortly after the take down.

"We have the area locked down," an officer says, coming up on Sansa's side. He grimaces when he steps in a blood puddle, shaking out his shoes after quickly stepping back. "We should be able to have this cleared in an hour if we're lucky."

Sansa moves to take photos of the underside of the Nomu, taking note of the tangled intestines drooping down. "What time did the heroes

respond?"

"They were the first on scene. Apparently this thing crawled right out from the sewers right over there." The man takes off his cap and messes with his hair before putting it back on. "The skin is made of a spongy, almost jelly-like substance. That's probably how it managed to squeeze through and bounce back from most of the attacks."

"This is the first of its kind that we've seen, so we need to have additional units in this region for the next few weeks. This is obviously a test of some kind, so we need to be prepared for more."

"A test of what, to see how well it performs?"

Sansa nods, eyes narrowing. "That's been the case for the others, at least as far as I've seen. None have been fully equipped with the powers the Nomu from the attack on UA did, so we can only assume these are trials for newer, updated versions."

"They're popping up all over the nation, though," the officer replies, following him. "You think the person behind this has facilities in each district where they're making them?"

"It's likely."

The officer leaves him alone with a muttered curse, going to help some of the other cops on scene.

Sansa takes out his notepad and scribbles down what he sees, sighing when it begins to storm once again. They're in typhoon season now, and it seems like it's raining more often than it is shining. He's responded to a few of these calls in the couple of weeks that he's been stationed here. Nomu sightings are always reported nowadays, but rarely are they actually identified and put down—this is just another side effect of the horrific attacks during Hosu.

Everyone is scared, and rightfully so.

At the end of each leg, a set of three spiky talons are curved inwards. This creature was engineered to dig to the surface and hold onto its victims without letting go, as evident by its lack of teeth.

Creating as much destruction and wreaking as much havoc as possible —that seems to be the only reason this thing was thought up. It's a mindless killing machine.

No exposed brain, Sansa thinks. *Rare for a Nomu.*

Could it be that each attack, each sighting, is a field experiment for the villain responsible for all of this? The *demon king?* It has to be true, because each Nomu builds upon the weakness of the last. Each creature has a different task, a different genetic makeup courtesy of the human remains used to start them, and a different perceived purpose.

Sansa and the other teams formed for the handling of the Nomu have made sure that nothing is left over from the creatures they manage to defeat. The last thing they want is for the villain to snatch the remains from them to recycle. Now, they did try to leave a corpse for a night unattended to see if that would draw the villain out, but that didn't work.

It only just cost them all of the evidence when it disappeared seemingly within seconds off camera.

As Sansa turns in for the night and heads back to his apartment, his mind is filled with questions. The Nomu sightings happen more often in central Japan, with the densest parts being centered around Hosu. Now, Sansa knows a lot of these 'sightings' are likely people being paranoid, especially since the city is still being slowly rebuilt, but he's also not dumb enough to believe that at least a fourth of the reports *aren't* true.

Northern Japan, specifically the coastline, hasn't had a lot, and they've had even less actual physical encounters, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Southern Japan has only had two interactions —one of the ten heroes who responded in total didn't make it to the end.

So, the real question is whether or not the main base of this *demon king* —assuming he is real and very much responsible for the newest breeds of these monsters—is centered in Japan. Because most of the Nomu are reported here, could it be that the villain is purposefully releasing creatures in these cities with higher population densities, or is it that he's targeting a group or corporation specifically?

Or, Sansa thinks with a bad taste in his mouth, he's targeting *one* person.

There are no correlations between the recent attacks. One could argue that UA High School for Heroics is a primary target given that the first event happened at UA's training facility—and also given that one of

the other major battles included many of *their* hero students all the way in *Hosu.* But Sansa doesn't think that's just it. That could've honestly been a stroke of luck.

It was internship and work study season for most high schools, not just hero schools, so students were spread all around the nation—as were heroes. Sansa is much more inclined to believe that hero society itself is the target. This villain, the so-called demon king, wants to destabilize the near century-long marketization of, reliance upon, and public trust *in* professional heroes. Likely to make way for a new social order that will pave the way for the demon king to be *handed* his crown by ordinary supporters—like a true tyrant and usurper.

This could all also just be a ruse, and that's what's stressing Sansa the most. This group of villains (as he doesn't believe for one second that there's only one man behind this) must have access to materials, resources, and a load of expendable money. There could be snakes in higher up governmental agencies *helping* the cause. The Hero Public Safety Commission is a major suspect, as they definitely have the most pull in all departments of Japanese social life, but Sansa and Naomasa cannot throw around accusations recklessly. At least, not unless they want someone to come and forcefully shut them up.

Even besides that threat, Sansa doubts it could be anyone on the Board, as he's come into contact with them once before on a special occasion. They're all ruthless, cold-minded individuals, but only regarding the topic of villains. They have a harsh view on society because they've lived a harsh life as a product of it, and they've turned their sights on creating a better place for the future, even if that means ruining the present. So, rather, Sansa thinks it must be a hospital director that's behind the genetic engineering aspects of this case. That seems much more likely.

Someone with experience, someone highly respected and knowledgeable, someone that people wouldn't want to doubt or think twice about.

Someone with *high authority and clearance.*

Granted, that could be thousands of individuals just in central Japan alone. Without more information, they have no way to narrow down the search, and the police department doesn't have enough resources to blindly investigate each random doctor and their hobbies outside of work. That would require court orders, money, and people willing to do it.

If they want to go that route, private agencies and investors would have to be used, and at that point, Sansa's role in the case comes to an abrupt halt.

"Are you alright?"

He looks up from his steaming mug and blinks at Inko, whose head is tipped slightly to one side in concern. She has a lemon danish in hand and her own mug set off to the side.

They're at a twenty-four hour cafe, and it's late at night now—or early in the morning, depending on your own view. A couple of times a week, they find themselves here together. For some reason, they've been talking more and more. She's a good baker and an even greater cook, and everything she makes has Sansa pushing away his pride to ask her if he can try some of whatever she's making.

She obliges every time with a smile, welcoming him in. It's not like this was unexpected—she did, after all, *insist* he try her cooking one of the last times they saw each other in the apartment complex.

But sometimes, not wanting to be cooped up in a small apartment, Sansa walks with her to this cafe to calm himself down and eat. And after the Nomu incident earlier in the night, this is what he needs.

He sets his mug down and nods, looking out the window. It's drizzling now, and he watches the droplets slide down the glass. "Just tired."

"Long night?" She asks thoughtfully, and he hums in affirmation.

"It always is."

She smiles at him and lifts up her mug. He turns to his own food and hesitates, not feeling particularly hungry.

"They certainly ask a lot from you," she remarks.

"I took the job knowing this is what it would be like. I wouldn't change it for anything."

"They must be glad to have someone like you on the force then."

Sansa thinks of Naomasa and finally picks up his own sweet treat. "I only hope I do enough."

Her eyes crinkle near the edges. "I think it'd be clear to anyone that you work really hard."

Sansa has nothing to say to that, so he stays quiet and takes a small bite of his danish. It's flaky and warm in his mouth, and it doesn't taste as bad as his mind was assuring him it would.

Working hard doesn't mean a thing, but obviously he's not going to argue with his neighbor. She's been so polite and sweet to him, and there's nothing to argue about anyway. His work burdens should not be placed onto her in any way, shape, or form, so he will gladly let things go if it means she stays so unaware.

"That one is larger than all the others," Inko says to herself, and when Sansa glances at her, she's looking at the television strung up in the corner of the room. Images of the Nomu he was investigating just an hour earlier appear on the news channel, making him sigh a little.

"Lengthwise, sure, but the Moth-like one from Hosu has it beat in width if you count its wings."

"Do you think it might be the heaviest, though?"

"It could make itself bigger by around two hundred square feet using inflated fat storages and excess skin, so I think it must be."

Wrinkles appear on her forehead in silent worry. "They're getting stronger, aren't they?"

Sansa thinks carefully. "Fortunately, we've been able to collect direct samples from them in order to better prepare for any future attacks. They seem to be getting more complex, sure, but with each interaction, *we* grow stronger alongside them. Soon, we'll outpace them. We're still ahead of them now anyway."

"I have faith in our heroes, old and new," Inko says quietly, fond eyes still glued to the news station. "I'm not too worried."

Still, there is something worrisome etched in the lines in her expression. Sadness and regret sit like stagnant air around her, and Sansa's nose twitches as he pulls away a tiny bit.

He wonders how a woman who seems to have experienced the worst can still hold so much trust in the flawed system that has no doubt failed her. Or perhaps it is that, like millions of others out there, she feels *she* has failed the system, not the other way around.

Sansa thinks of his mother and of his subsequent place in the world, and suddenly he doesn't have to wonder anymore.

Izuku remembers with striking detail the first time he ever attempted to run.

It seems a laughable idea now that he's older—running for help. Not just because he was running from *All for One,* but because he was running from his *father.*

All for One is cunning and mean, but Izuku argues that Midoriya Hisashi was even meaner sometimes.

It confused Izuku to no end back then how hurt was made out to be a subset of love. Inko hurt him sometimes, but later on, with tears running down her cheeks, she would grab Izuku tightly and tell him that what she did wasn't right, and that he should never think otherwise. She never claimed she did any of that stuff out of love, and nor did All for One, for that matter.

The difference, however, is that his father actually meant it that way. He just never had to say it aloud.

"I'm doing this to make you stronger," he'd tell him, all soft and annoyed like Izuku is a puppy that just won't learn. He'd walk forward, gesturing with his hands as if to explain himself, to teach Izuku, and all the while Izuku would be scrubbing his face with bruised knuckles, begging, hoping, praying his father wouldn't see the way he was fighting back tears. *"You know that, don't you? Of course you do. You've always been so smart."*

Izuku didn't run the first time All for One hit him. He didn't even run the second, third, or fourth time.

The fifth time, though, All for One hit Tomura, too. It was the first time he did that in front of Izuku, and it scared him—seeing his father hit his older brother. He had thought he was the only one being hit like that, because he was young wasn't he? That's what Father said. And that's why he deserved it. But Tomura was older, and Izuku thought that meant the hits would stop.

It terrified Izuku—the idea that even when you grow up and get stronger and prove yourself, the hits would continue to come the

moment you slipped up. And they would only get more painful.

“Midoriya?”

So, Izuku ran. Kurogiri and All for One were away on some mission, and Tomura was nowhere to be found, so he naively thought he could do it. He ran into two heroes, and they saw his face, littered with cuts and mottled bruises, and stormed into the direction they saw Izuku running from out of the woods.

It was the heroes’ turn, then, to listen to Izuku’s begging, as Izuku didn’t want them to go to the facility. He knew, right then, that he had made a mistake. One of the heroes held him and stayed with him as the other one investigated, but he never came back.

Just as the woman attempting to console Izuku was about to call it in, to order more heroes onto the scene to check on her partner, black sludge erupted from her mouth and forced her to her knees.

Her eyes bulged out of her skull, and then she was gone in the next second when the sludge enveloped her whole. Izuku was next, and the putrid smell had him gagging and shivering, hands shoving down his throat to try and clear his airways, but it was no use against Father’s will.

When he appeared deep inside the facility, there they were. The two heroes were bolted to the concrete by bone spikes arching up from the floor, and metal pieces were melted to their jaws to prevent them from speaking.

“Midoriya.”

Father was in between them, head tilted back so he could look at the ceiling, his jaw set. Blood stained his white dress shirt, and Izuku shrank back instinctively, noticing that his jacket was thrown off to the side.

“That was childish, wasn’t it?” He asked when he finally looked down at his son. *“You see what happens when you don’t think things through? Look what I had to do to them.”*

Izuku remembers hearing the sounds of the heroes’ hearts. With the holes in their chests and the blood flowing freely out of them, he was able to physically *hear* each pump of blood spewing out.

They weren’t crying, as they were far past that kind of pain. Hazy,

empty eyes stared at the slippery floor, and All for One only nudged Izuku forward, having appeared behind him.

"Go on. See for yourself. Don't worry; I'm not angry anymore." He knelt down beside Izuku then and put his hand on the woman's bare arm. It only took a moment, with static crackling like electricity around them, for him to steal the remnants of her quirk right before her heart stopped. *"This is the perfect opportunity. You did so well for me."*

Izuku was numb. He didn't feel the blood soaking his shoes. He didn't notice how Father was guiding his hands forward. He only saw the way the hero's eyes flicked up slowly, boring into his, and he couldn't think of anything else.

"Be quick now; he'll be going at any moment."

Maybe Izuku begged his father then, too, but nothing else mattered at that moment beyond the way he was forced to activate his own quirk against the man's skin.

The first time Izuku ran successfully was the first time he could say he killed someone.

"Pup, did you hear him?" Hound Dog's gentle hand resting on the bed beside Izuku's leg shakes him free from his thoughts. He blinks, and when he looks up, for a moment he doesn't see Detective Tsukauchi and the counselor. He sees two young heroes who were murdered for trying to protect a child in need of help.

Izuku swipes his arm over his face. "Yeah. I'm sorry. I just—I don't know. Can you ask it again?"

Tsukauchi stares at him for a long while, creases appearing on his forehead, and when he repeats himself, his words are slow and careful.

How many times have you used your original quirk?

Oh, yeah, that's right, Izuku thinks. That's what he asked a minute ago. It's the first question, and Izuku is already tired of this even though he just woke up.

He rubs the back of his neck, soothing the itch there.

"A lot," he says, focusing on the scratch of Tsukauchi's pen against his notepad.

The man is gentle with his next question. “How many of those were successful?”

Hound Dog studies his face, eyes scanning his body for any sign that Izuku will be harmed by answering this. But Izuku just swallows and looks up at the ceiling, counting. “Six?”

“So the quirks you have right now—those are all ones you’ve taken?”

Izuku winces but quickly smooths his expression down. “No. Some were… forced on me. By him. The, uh, number I gave—I don’t actually still have all of the quirks I’ve stolen before. He took some away.”

It’s clear the answer intrigues Tsukauchi, but he drops that subject. “Okay. But does that number include the winged Nomu from Hosu?”

Tsukauchi isn’t accusing him when he asks it—he only sounds clinical. And somehow this is what helps Izuku continue on. He doesn’t need pity, and he doesn’t want comfort right now, not anymore. Not from Tsukauchi, not from Hound Dog. He’s grateful the counselor is here, sure, but he’d have rather taken a hundred private sessions with the man than have had his first one be with Tsukauchi right beside him asking the questions.

“Yes,” Izuku says. “He—that’s the most recent.”

“How old were you when you first managed to take a quirk?”

At this, Izuku’s mouth snaps shut. He slides his hands under his thighs to stop himself from fiddling with them any longer. He doesn’t like that line of questioning. He feels that some of this is unimportant and unnecessary, because half of this information is written out in hysterics in that traitorous journal, which Tsukauchi has no doubt laid eyes on thanks to Nezu.

But just how *much* Tsukauchi managed to see is what Izuku doesn’t know. Is he starting from the beginning just to ensure Izuku isn’t lying or distorting things, or does he genuinely not know this stuff?

“Young,” Izuku replies stiffly, and the blatant avoidance of a direct answer seems to tell Tsukauchi that he doesn’t want to discuss it further, because he moves on without complaint.

Izuku doesn’t miss the way Hound Dog is writing his own notes down in a book that looks comically small in his hands.

“And Extract is what you call it, right?” At Izuku’s nod, he asks right after, “And you developed it? You weren’t given it?”

“I developed it when I was four.” A small amount of bitterness leaks into his voice. “His genes were stronger when it came to quirks, I guess.”

Tsukauchi straightens up, and his lips pull a little bit at the corners in distaste. “So, All for One is a relative.”

Izuku hesitates. He wants to know why Tsukauchi isn’t aware of the fact that All for One is his father yet, but then he remembers that not once has he ever actually referred to him as that in the journal. He has long since ripped out and scribbled the pages that did—the entries from when he was much younger.

But there’s no use concealing it any longer. He just admitted to having a similar quirk from birth, for fuck’s sake. What does it matter if he’s related distantly to All for One or related to him *directly?* Either way, he was raised by him, and he will always be seen in that light.

“Well,” Izuku says in a quiet tone, each word like a blade scraping against the inside of his mouth, “he is my—my father, so.”

The blunt answer makes Tsukauchi breathe out heavily. He leans back in his chair and puts an ankle over his knee, hand coming up to his chin. He doesn’t speak for a long moment. “How did he manage that?”

Izuku’s face sours, and he looks awkwardly from Tsukauchi to Hound Dog a few times. “I wasn’t exactly there, but you can probably imagine what—”

“I meant biologically,” Tsukauchi quickly corrects, but not without an exasperated, almost fond roll of his eyes. “As far as we understand, he’s centuries old, and he comes from a generation that’s much older than any current one, yes? The fact that you have a quirk at all is a miracle, son—much less one similar to his. His first generation blood should have made it nearly impossible.”

His meaning is clear: Izuku, in many ways, should not exist. He is an anomaly.

The reminder forms a pit at the bottom of Izuku’s stomach. He stares back down at the sheets, tongue feeling heavy. He’s not able to keep the resentment out of his voice when he says, “Guess I was *lucky.”*

Tsukauchi clears his throat, and Hound Dog makes another note subtly. It shouldn't make Izuku feel inferior or bad, but it does, and he despises it.

So, he tries his best to push away his embittered feelings and answer more helpfully. "He has multiple anti-aging quirks. The main one he—he calls *Longevity*. It slows down the deterioration of most of his major organs by increasing the efficiency of blood cell reproduction and tissue regeneration. That's why he looks like he's still in his early thirties. At least, he did before All Might smashed his face in. He was just aging really, really slowly in proportion to the average human." Izuku shrugs. "That's probably what allowed him to still be able to produce viable, uh, stuff, if that makes sense. To his body, he's still less than a century old."

Tsukauchi writes it all quickly, nodding. When he looks up, he seems to force himself to slow down. He waits for Izuku's full attention before starting again, rolling just an inch closer. "You were staying with him when he fought All Might, correct? What was he like before that incident?"

Izuku pauses, heart constricting.

There are many things he wants to say, hundreds and thousands of miniscule details he could give about his father's every change in mannerism from back then to the period of time *after* All Might's win against him. But most of it would likely be biased, as Izuku was only around seven years old when it happened and only knew the side of his father that he wanted to see.

"Patient," he settles on, counting the nicks on his skin. "He wasn't as… frenetic."

Tsukauchi doesn't write anything down. He holds Izuku's gaze like one would a bowl of china. "He was nicer?"

"Just more controlled."

"After the change, what were some of the things he'd say regarding the fight? Was he surprised, angry, or something else?"

"He never talked about it directly with me, not until I—I was older. Most times he was just silent." Izuku shivers despite himself. "But I heard him speak about it too—to Kuro some nights. And he'd always say that he's still going to end up killing All Might sooner or later, and that he'll take back One for All for sure the next time he comes into

contact with him. This is when he really started to work with the doctor on the Nomu—but they weren't really called that then."

Hound Dog tips his head forward. "Kuro?"

"Kurogiri," Tsukauchi answers, but he's still looking at Izuku.

The boy shrugs. "My caretaker." A pang erupts from his chest, and he corrects himself. "He was the one who took care of Tomura and I."

"And Tomura is your brother?" Hound Dog rumbles, and Izuku isn't able to force out a verbal reply this time.

Tsukauchi doesn't seem to need one. "This is why you corrupted the footage from the USJ attack before Nezu could fully look at it, right? Because you were talking with him."

"He doesn't like me much anymore," Izuku states in a soft tone. "I wasn't really keen on the idea of other people hearing what was said."

"When did you first come into contact with him?"

"Kurogiri or Tomura?"

Tsukauchi clicks his pen. "Both."

"I met Kuro the first day I was—I was with All for One." The memories are salt on old wounds. "And my brother the night after."

"He's not your biological brother, correct?"

The real question is thinly hidden: *he's not All for One's biological son, is he?*

Izuku shakes his head, thinking to himself that if this is how hard even briefly *mentioning* his family—his old family, he corrects—is, then he doesn't want to continue at all. What will happen once Tsukauchi inevitably has to ask the harder, more detailed questions? What will Izuku do then?

"Can you describe the three of them for me?"

"What do you want me to say?

"Anything at all. Anything important you think we should know to be able to apprehend them."

And there it is: the truth. The real goal of what this entire operation is. Izuku's very existence is proof that All for One is alive and well and planning even worse schemes than before. And with a new enemy in the mix by the name of Shigaraki Tomura, it's altogether too obvious that they want to put them *all* down as swiftly as possible before they get even stronger.

Izuku knows that means killing All for One and maybe even Kurogiri, regretfully, but some small part of himself withers at the idea of seeing his own brother's death.

He starts with Kurogiri first. It's easier to run through characteristics clinically, because then Izuku can pretend he's just giving out information about interesting people he's studied and *not* telling the authorities things about his family he doesn't really want to mention.

"He's one of the first successful Nomu, and he's also the most intelligent. He can—well, he's able to think rationally and come to decisions himself. And I—I'd say he has his own emotions at times, at least whenever F—All for One isn't around. He was built from a corpse just like the others, I think, but because of the nature of his quirks, he doesn't need a thicker body or a layer of extra biological matter to protect him. That's why even though he was one of the first, he's still pretty much the most formidable. You can't touch him unless you knock off his neck brace."

Tsukauchi has his phone out now, looking at the blurry pictures he's saved from the early footage of the USJ. "So, there's a real person beneath the mist?"

"I used to think there was, but then All for One wiped him, and he wasn't really the same." Izuku thinks of yellow eyes and low hums, and he frowns. "I mean, whoever he was before is dead. But I still like to believe he's good somehow. He was always really nice to me." He winces. "When he could afford to be."

"Have you ever seen his body without the smoke?"

"Only glimpses of his face. It's hard to really remember."

"What would you say his relationship with All for One was like?" Hound Dog asks then. "In comparison with you."

Izuku swallows and carefully tells the two of All for One's dictator-like role in their small family, and how his word was law. It was enforced by Kurogiri—though not always willingly. Kurogiri was almost

programmed to carry out certain duties, and most times he was physically unable to disobey All for One.

He speaks the least on Tomura when he arrives on the topic. He gives the more important characteristics and mannerisms of his brother, including his uncontrollable anger and short fuse, and he mentions everything he knows about Decay and how it's directly linked to his emotional state, but he doesn't talk much at all about their relationship before things went to shit.

When Hound Dog prods gently for it, Izuku only shrugs. "We were pitted against each other when we got older. That's why he wants to kill me now. I…"

His mouth shuts with a small *click.* Izuku left his brother behind. He knows Tomura didn't want to come, but that doesn't matter. Some part of his brother must feel wronged, surely. Izuku could've done more.

He takes a second to regroup his thoughts and reel back his emotions before continuing onto All for One. He can feel Aizawa's rising anxiety and trepidation outside the door, and he doesn't want to accidentally be relaying any of his own thoughts and feelings into the air between them, as it seems his teacher has a good grasp on his student's emotions as of late.

Izuku has a feeling it's because of Link.

Taking his time discussing All for One's style of teaching and strategic planning, Izuku talks directly to Tsukauchi, knowing this is the part that matters the most to him. For the most part, neither Tsukauchi nor Hound Dog interrupt Izuku for clarification, sensing that if he gets distracted now, he might stop the information vomit entirely.

He tries to mention the quirks he can remember his father having at the time he left, but he knows he's missing over a hundred.

Not even Father told him everything about him.

"Which of the quirks you currently have were given to you by him?" Tsukauchi asks next, sounding almost apologetic, and Izuku physically jerks.

His hands hurt, and he instinctively scratches the base of his neck. "I…" Extract itches in his mind, and he swallows back bile. "I don't…"

“Don’t give me that,” All for One says, an edge to his voice that betrays his humorous tone. Izuku writhes in his hold, sobbing and clawing at his skin, attempting to dig out the monster in him. He vaguely feels the warmth of a hand evaporating from his shoulder, and he only struggles more. “You wanted it, didn’t you? You’ll learn to bear the pain. You might even learn to like it, just as I did.”

When Hound Dog calls his name this time, Izuku comes back instantly. He’s staring at the wall, face frozen in thought.

“If you don’t want to answer, pup,” Hound Dog reminds, his ears perked, “you don’t have to. You don’t need to explain yourself here.”

He nods, clutching onto the words like a lifeline. “Okay. Yeah. I—I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Tsukauchi says quickly, moving on. “Can you talk about the doctor you mentioned? The one you said works with All for One?”

Izuku, thankful for the topic change, talks in a more hushed tone. He was never supposed to mention the doctor around his father without good reason, as All for One hated allowing Izuku near him most times anyway. He tells Tsukauchi quietly about how the doctor is an older man who has a longevity quirk to match All for One’s.

“So he’s as old as All for One?” Tsukauchi asks, and Izuku hears how his breathing picks up slightly.

“I’m not sure, but I do know they met when they were both already older,” Izuku replies. “I, uh, don’t know his name, so I can’t give any more than a description, but his quirk makes him look younger than he is. He still looks old, and his physical mobility has greatly decreased, but you wouldn’t be able to tell upon first glance that he’s actually over a century old, y’know? He’s a little big, but he’s short. Used to wear gear-shaped glasses around me. Almost looked like—what’s his name? Doctor Eggman?”

Hound Dog and Tsukauchi blink at him, and Izuku looks away, pressing his back against the wall again in discomfort.

“Sorry. Really old cartoon,” he whispers.

“I’ll look it up,” Tsukauchi says with a nod, writing the name down. “Tell me about his work.”

He runs his tongue across the back of his teeth, keeping his lips pursed together. “He’s a quirk genius, really. I was pretty envious of him when I… I was younger. He knows everything about quirks—the biological, technical, *and* mental side of them. It’s crazy. He creates the Nomu as perfect specimens with perfect quirks, and he would offer the prototypes to my—to All for One. As a gift.”

“If we show you pictures of doctors similar to the descriptions you gave, would you be able to pick him out?”

“Maybe?” Izuku shrugs. “There are probably thousands that match that, though. And he always changed his appearance when he was away from the facility.”

Hound Dog grows interested at that. “You’ve mentioned a facility before,” he says. “Is that where you lived with him?”

Izuku feels that same familiar spike of fear and tries his hardest to beat it back down as he nods.

“Where is that located?” Tsukauchi asks, jumping on the opportunity.

“A few cities over in the neighboring prefecture. We were in the middle of the woods a mile or so away from town. But you won’t find anything, sir.” He says the last part in a slightly shaky tone.

“Why is that?”

“I destroyed most of it when I left. It’s all just concrete.”

“Have you been there since?” Hound Dog ventures.

Izuku is silent. His own breathing starts to increase this time, and he looks back down at his lap, shifting around. He went back a couple of times, a year after the incident, and both times he searched through the rubble for remnants of the people he used to call home.

He knew without a doubt that none of them actually died, but that didn’t stop him from looking. Maybe he wasn’t looking for them, though. Maybe he was looking for himself.

“I'm certain I already know the answer, but I have to ask, son: do you know where he is now?”

“No. I… Extract lets me sense the quirks of others. And if I’m used to them, I can pinpoint their location within thirty miles from me if I

really focus. But I can't sense him anymore," he says, eyes squinting. "Or any of them. And, honestly, I don't know where he'd be. I—I check for them every minute."

"So, you'd say that as of this moment, none of them are within a thirty mile range of us?" At Izuku's nod, Tsukauchi seems to relax just a fraction more. "Thank you. While we're on the topic, can you tell us the differences between Extract and All for One?"

Izuku knew this was coming, of course, but it still ends up as a blade against his throat. He bites his lip and jerks out a hand. "Might make more sense if I can draw it out in a chart."

Hound Dog provides Izuku with a pen and paper, so the boy tries his best to create a simple diagram of the differences and similarities between Extract and All for One. He's shaking still—he has to scribble words out multiple times because of how bad it is, but he doesn't stop.

This is a question he prefers. This is something he can more easily answer without any of the other emotional shit. He likes this more, even though it's still painful.

As he writes, Tsukauchi clears his throat, and his voice changes to be a little less professional. "I saw your drawings of him," he admits, and Izuku pauses. "Well, at least the ones without his face."

When Izuku doesn't say anything, Tsukauchi continues, more careful than he's ever been before.

"At the hospital that day, why didn't you tell me the truth when I asked you about your quirk? You knew I already knew."

Izuku resolutely doesn't look at either of the two men. He continues his diagram, making it a lot less simplistic and a lot more complex than he was supposed to. He wishes they would stop looking at him. He's in a hospital bed, and they're both in chairs. Hound Dog is large in person, and Tsukauchi is large in *threatening* knowledge.

If they could do all of this without face-to-face contact, Izuku would be much less afraid.

"If I said it aloud, and you pinged it as true, I thought you'd have to tell All Might," he murmurs, instinctively extending his senses just to reassure himself his master is not here.

Tsukauchi's brows knit together. "At that moment, I only thought you had been in passing contact with All for One, and that's why you had that quirk. I never would have guessed that you were in his presence for more than a few hours, much less for years during your childhood. So, even if you *did* tell me, and I told Toshinori my fear, he wouldn't have been as mad. You realize that, don't you?"

Izuku presses hard on the pen, and ink splurts out the sides, messing up some of his words. He scribbles them out and continues on, eyes burning. He's not going to give anything else on the subject unless specifically asked about it.

He wouldn't have been happy with Yagi knowing *any* of it.

Hound Dog leans closer, and the smell of his clean fur wafts toward Izuku. "The idea of him finding out," he begins, "how did that make you feel? Before all of this, that is."

Izuku hesitates only because he's not entirely sure. He knows he's had his fair share of silent meltdowns, hidden away from everyone else and even Kacchan, regarding the idea of All Might finding out about his parentage—but has he ever rationalized them? Has he ever taken time to really think about what exactly he was feeling?

He doesn't think he's ever put too much thought on his own emotions. They never mattered except when they were getting in the way of his work.

Izuku hands the paper to Tsukauchi, his entire body burning. "I don't know. I just didn't want him to regret choosing me."

Neither of the adults say anything for a few seconds, and their guarded gazes are an errant presence at the base of his skull. He's grateful when Tsukauchi's phone buzzes and breaks the silence. The detective glances at his screen before sighing and standing up.

"I think we'll have to stop here for today. I'll need to come back at a later time and talk with you more—we might have to do a few of these to get more detailed information as time goes on. Does that sound okay?" He asks.

Izuku only mumbles a *yes,* and Tsukauchi softens more.

He grabs his bag and puts his journal inside, swiping his hair back with a hand. "You really are doing great, Midoriya. It's important you know that."

Hound Dog voices his agreement, giving Izuku a reassuring smile. Before Tsukauchi walks out, however, he turns back around as if on afterthought and kneels before Izuku. He places a hand on the side of the bed next to the boy's leg, not touching him, but it's something like comfort anyway.

"I already know you'd never do anything to us. I don't want you thinking you have to prove anything to me, alright?" He lets a quiet huff escape him. "But just to make things easier for all of us, you have to promise me you won't try to disappear on Shouta or the others again, alright? Not like those other instances. I need you within their eyesight at all times. Can you do that for me?"

In true Izuku fashion, the boy adopts a slightly vigilant tone. "What if I do leave?"

Tsukauchi raises a brow. "I know you won't, because you're too smart for that, but in that *impossible* scenario…" He trails off and catches Izuku's eye. "We would have to retrieve you. And we would then be forced to secure you. Do you understand why?"

Oh, certainly. That's probably the thing Izuku understands the most right now. He *is* smart enough to know what being secured would entail, too. "Yeah," he says hoarsely.

He's thankful for Tsukauchi's honesty.

The indirect submission seems to make Tsukauchi feel better at least, as he flashes Izuku a warmer look. "I'll see you in the next few days. Thank you, son." He waves his phone at him. "And text me more, alright? You have my number and you know you're allowed to use it for anything."

Izuku promises he will, and he watches as Tsukauchi walks outside the room to talk with Aizawa. Hound Dog stays in his seat, however, and asks Izuku a few more questions just to ensure he's alright.

If Izuku isn't mistaken, this is like the closing portion of a counseling session. At least, that's what Kacchan says happened in his own sessions. Hound Dog is making sure Izuku is in a relatively stable mindset before he leaves, and the boy appreciates it, he really does, but he *also* just wants to be left alone.

Thankfully, the counselor does depart when Aizawa walks back inside, allowing Izuku to deflate fully. He rests his head back on his pillow, closing his eyes tight.

Clothing ruffles when Aizawa sits down. “You okay?” He asks.

“Mhm.”

“That’s convincing.”

Izuku looks at him. The man’s arms are crossed, and he’s facing in Izuku’s direction. “It was fine.”

“Do you want to talk to me about anything you discussed?”

“Not really.”

“Was it rough?”

“Could've been worse,” he points out, though that sounds even less believable.

Aizawa tips his head. “Well, the first time is always the hardest.”

The boy frowns. “So it’ll get better the next time?”

“No.”

His blunt tone has Izuku snorting abruptly. He glares accusingly at the man. “Aren’t you supposed to be encouraging me or something?”

“You want me to lie to you?”

This makes Izuku stop, and he begrudgingly mutters, “Guess not.”

Aizawa makes a hand gesture as if to say *okay then,* and Izuku looks back up at the ceiling. He mulls over his teacher’s words, and he finds those dark thoughts from before returning. He turns over on his side, facing the wall.

“Did it really never get easier for you?” He whispers so quietly he wonders if Aizawa will even hear.

The underground hero hums in consideration. “When I first started counseling, I really only had Mic—but even then we were separated. I didn’t have a good… system, I guess. So it was hard for me to reconcile with myself and where I stood in the world. But *you?”* His voice changes a little. “You just have to know you’ve got other people in your system now. Remember that, and I think it starts to sting a little less.”

Izuku brings his knees to his chest, curling into himself. He winces a little when his sore limbs protest the motion, but he bites back his quiet cries. “Thank you, Aizawa,” he says instead, and the man grunts.

“You don’t have to call me that anymore, kid,” Aizawa tells him. “You’ve lived under our roof for a while now—it’s more weird to keep calling me that.”

The sudden verbal permission to use his guardian’s first name makes his mind go completely blank. His mouth opens, but nothing comes out at first.

“Okay,” he replies, because saying *Shouta* aloud is a little too much for him right now. Maybe he’ll practice it later in private.

Neither of them speak after that, and it’s better that way. The two of them wait for Recovery Girl to arrive back to UA for his last round of healing, and Izuku wonders where he would be at this moment if he did manage to escape.

Would he be regretting it by now?

Honestly, Shouta wants to be angry. It seems the most logical course of action—getting pissed off. He’s never had an issue doing that before. In fact, he thinks he’s gotten angry more times than he’s ever been *really* happy.

Regardless of whatever reasoning he had, Yagi neglected to tell *any* of the other teachers besides Nezu of the horrifying quirk that is One for All. He and his boss kept it to themselves for, what, years? But that’s not what Shouta cares about, to be honest. He couldn’t give one rat’s ass about Yagi’s quirk—that is, before he gave it to one of his students.

Now, though? It *matters.*

Did that not click in Yagi’s head? Did he get hit one too many times during his thirty years of heroism? Shouta just can’t *fathom* why Yagi wouldn’t at least tell *one* of Izuku’s other teachers. His silence made it so that Shouta and the others were unable to correctly and most

efficiently teach Izuku. They've practically been going in blind. And with this revelation comes another problem: Izuku's old quirk suppressant ring. He made that a few months ago—the timelines match up.

He didn't make it for Boost as he had previously told Shouta, no. He made it because he was having trouble with One for All.

It genuinely annoys Shouta to no end. Sure, a *little* blame could be placed on the kid, but he was being entrusted with a centuries old generational quirk, and along with that he was being passed down a legacy. It's more understandable why a child like Izuku would hesitate to want to tell anyone—especially given who his father is.

Yeah, Naomasa told Shouta that large fucking piece of the puzzle. It makes so much more sense why Izuku is *terrified* of the idea of Yagi finding out about his parentage.

It just so happens that his father is the *exact* reason One for All was created.

Shouta thinks wryly that Izuku should enter an unlucky contest. He'd surely win first place, no debate.

Even besides *that,* though—there's less of a reason why Yagi wouldn't tell them. Sure, Izuku was adamant that he was the one who hesitated, and that Yagi told him he *should* tell them, but Izuku is still young. That's not to say he's stupid—a little too self-sacrificing, though, maybe. Izuku obviously understood why it would be beneficial to alert the other teachers, but he didn't because he probably thought he could make up for the lack of good teaching with his own experience and trial and error.

Shouta has to admit, however, that Izuku hasn't been doing too badly with that. At the beginning of the school year, he would hurt himself too much, but now he's gotten much better. The recent fight with those dinosaur mutants proved that.

Still, Shouta contends he has a right to feel this way.

It would be illogical to be pissed at Yagi's apparent neglect, though, because here Shouta is, listening as All Might rushes down the hallway and towards the room Izuku is currently being treated by Chiyo in. He's breathing hard, and his worry is almost palpable. If Shouta wasn't blindfolded, he wagers he'd see steam coming off of the man; he likely ran all of the way here.

It's clear to anyone with even half a brain cell that Yagi cares for his student a lot, and he'd be willing to do anything for him. This thought at least makes Shouta calmer by the time Yagi is jogging toward him.

The only issue is that not even Shouta knows how far Yagi's care extends. It's weird, having to act natural when you now know something that would surely be devastating to the other person. Shouta has to stand here before Yagi, and he has to lie.

"You can't tell him," Izuku pleads sometime in the middle of his breakdown, and he's gripping Shouta's shirt so hard that a small tear forms. "You can't. You can't. Please don't."

And so Shouta doesn't.

"It would've been nice to have been told earlier," he begins neutrally, leaning against the wall outside of the room. He hears Yagi slow down before him, confusion permeating through the air. "Though I understand why you didn't."

It takes approximately four seconds for Yagi's brain to catch up. A soft sigh escapes his lips before he speaks, and Shouta lifts his head to listen better. "He told you?"

Shouta shrugs. "About One for All? Sure. Can't say I'm too happy about it, though I gotta admit it's one hell of a name."

He senses Yagi stepping closer, and when the man's hand lands on the handle, Shouta grabs his wrist. Even in his smaller form, his arms are large, and Shouta's fingers barely wrap around the man's forearm, so he doesn't even bother with attempting to physically hold the number one hero back. His simple touch does the trick to make Yagi pause anyway.

"Chiyo doesn't want anyone else in there yet," he informs. "She's healing him again, and afterwards he'll be cleared."

Yagi pulls away with a huff, though Shouta doubts it's towards him. "I feel I always arrive at the worst of times."

"No, it's better this way," Shouta counters in a low voice, aware of Izuku's enhanced hearing. Though the walls in the room are soundproofed outside and in, he won't be taking any chances. "He just finished having a chat with Naomasa, so maybe you can calm him down better than I could."

His words turn surprisingly steely. “What were they talking about?”

“Everything that’s happened and why,” Shouta says flatly. “He’s fine, but I’m sure he’s exhausted. Seeing you will help, but you might still wanna tread carefully.”

Yagi, despite his clear impatience, leans against the wall beside Shouta, sounding nervous. “Well, how have you been holding up? Have your eyes improved some?”

“A few more days and it’ll be back to normal.”

“Your quirk is fine?”

Shouta hesitates. On one hand he has no reason to lie or withhold this information, but on the other he doesn’t want Yagi accidentally telling Izuku this. “My max time has decreased, but only by a couple of seconds or so.”

Yagi winces. “Seems we’re in the same boat.”

“I use Erasure frequently, so another decrease was bound to happen sooner or later. I already prepared for it a while ago, which is why this isn’t detrimental to my work.”

“It’s still unacceptable that it had to happen sooner.”

Shouta moves past the comment. “Later, we all need to find time to discuss One for All in more depth, just to make sure we’re all on the same page. The kid told us some of it, but I bet that was only the tip of the iceberg.”

“Of course,” Yagi agrees. “And I know this isn’t worth much at the moment, but I do apologize for not letting you know about the quirk transfer. At the time, I was unsure if it would be more beneficial or harmful if everyone was aware of his situation.”

Shouta waves him off. “With the nature of the quirk, it’s safer when fewer people know. I get that. Even still, I would have liked to have been told when he started living with us. Or, at the very latest, right after Hosu.”

It’s clear that Yagi thought Izuku would be in a lot of danger if he told the other teachers, so to some extent, Shouta can respect his decision.

He doesn’t have to agree with it, though.

Chiyo allows them entrance a few minutes later, and Shouta only follows behind Yagi because he can *feel* Izuku's rising panic as clearly as he can feel heat by a campfire. No doubt due to his quirk-sensing power, Izuku's emotions tripled in intensity the moment Yagi stepped on campus. Shouta felt them as if they were his own, which is how he knows he needs to be in the room too to hopefully soothe Izuku's nerves.

He sends as much calmness as he can through the air, hoping it'll reach his student. He's still not entirely sure how their emotions are shared, but he has a feeling it's due to some kind of quirk and mental connection on Izuku's end.

I'll have to ask him about it later; I keep putting it off.

Yagi immediately makes for Izuku's side, and his concern is so poignant that Shouta is *almost* sick of it entirely.

"You look terrible still!" Yagi exclaims, and there's some more rustling of clothes as he likely touches Izuku. "God, my boy, how is it that you look worse after this than you did after our recent battle?"

The way Izuku's voice reaches Shouta's ears tells the man he's looking mostly at the floor. "It's just my face that's messed up, All Might. I'm not hurt."

"Well, you're incredibly lucky it's not more severe." Yagi huffs, but he sounds more disappointed than angry. "Seriously, what on earth were you thinking? What have I told you about how to respond in those types of situations?"

Izuku's anxiety spikes before his emotions are abruptly shut off from Shouta, and Yagi must sense this too, as he softens his tone considerably.

"Haven't I told you time and time again that when you find yourself in a position where you think you may need help, you need to take a step back and call someone?"

"You have," Izuku says quietly.

"I know this situation was extremely difficult, but it's during these times that it's most important to learn how to control yourself. We cannot afford to jump to conclusions or solve things the way we *wish* to solve them all the time. Do you understand that?"

“Yagi,” Shouta cuts in, keeping his tone light. He can’t see Izuku, but he knows the boy is tense. All Might should realize that although he has just as much of a right to scold Izuku as the other teachers do (and maybe *more* of a right considering their shared quirk, Shouta thinks irritatedly), the boy most definitely won’t appreciate having to hear this same exact speech for the nth time. Shouta knows firsthand that repeated lessons don’t teach Izuku at all—if anything, they just make the boy more stressed and, in some cases, more volatile later on.

He continues listening to the two talk to each other with Yagi being less intense this time, and he pays close attention to Izuku’s vocal cues. This must be hard for him, talking to All Might despite knowing they’re *all* now holding a large secret over his head, so Shouta needs to be on top of this conversation just in case things go south.

He isn’t sure how their relationship is going to work from here on out. Of course, being the number one hero, Yagi will *have* to know about Izuku’s connections to All for One sooner or later if things do come down to a battle, but for the moment it probably is better to keep quiet. Not that Shouta thinks All Might will do anything, but even still.

It’s more for Izuku’s sake than anything.

Geez, Shouta needs another nap, but he has a feeling he won’t be getting any rest for at least another week. He’s starting to miss the days where he had no one in his homeroom class. Actually, maybe that’s a *little* bit of a lie. Maybe he sort of likes being kept on his toes like this. At least he knows he won’t be growing out of touch anytime soon.

Which reminds him he has a session with Shinsou in the morning. He’s not too sure how it’s going to work, what with him being temporarily blind and all, but he’s certainly not going to cancel it. He has a lot of other ways to teach him.

Yagi’s quiet, near conspiratorial whisper catches Shouta’s attention. The large man’s voice sounds farther away this time, telling him that he’s leaning closer to Izuku. It seems Yagi is trying to get him to be a little less upset now that he’s not scolding him anymore.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I punched Gran in front of my master?”

Shouta’s head lifts up in interest, and he can easily feel Izuku’s sudden shock through the air.

“You hit him?” The boy asks, like the very idea is blasphemous, and his guarded tone completely vanishes with the words.

Yagi chuckles. “You don’t have to sound so surprised. Gran was much faster than I was then, sure, but I was still able to get in *one* punch at times.” He adds sheepishly, “Though in this instance, we weren’t training.”

Izuku catches on fast, and he’s hanging onto every word. “So you hit him just because? Were you… angry?”

“I was.” He sighs, reminiscing. “I was just about your age at the time, actually. Gran and I got into another one of our arguments. We never really did see eye to eye, even then. But this was right after a fight they allowed me to join, you see, and I was already, well, *pissed* over the outcome, for lack of a better way to say it. My master was still cleaning up, but Gran was immediately on me after we finished. He wouldn’t leave me alone about something I had done—I don’t even remember what it was now—and he kept following me, yelling the whole way.”

Shouta tries to picture a high school aged All Might being nagged by a *far* younger Gran Torino after a rough battle and nearly snorts at the thought alone. He knows Torino was much larger in his prime, so he can only imagine how it would feel to be lectured by the old hero in a situation like that.

“Oh, so he really has always been like that, then,” Izuku says with a little bit of tartness.

Yagi hums in amusement. “Indeed. Eventually, I couldn’t handle it anymore. He tried to turn me around to look at him… and when I did, I just—”

There’s a rush of air, and Shouta winces at the sound of knuckles against skin. A shiver snakes its way up his back, and he suddenly wishes he could see his coworker’s demonstration and Izuku’s wide eyes.

“No way,” Izuku breathes.

“Yep. I got him square in the face. His nose snapped, my hand was on fire, and then he was halfway down the block.”

Shouta tips his head forward, unable to stop himself. “Is that why his nose is crooked?”

This makes Yagi choke, and Izuku gasps again upon coming to the same realization.

"You did that?" The boy asks. "He told me it was some delinquent vigilante from years ago!"

Yagi barks in laughter. "I'm sure he did tell you that. He never did let it go—not that I blame him. I regretted it the second I did it, but not as much as I did when *she* touched down behind me just a moment later." He audibly shudders. "She said my name, my *first* name, and I knew I was done for."

For a few moments Izuku says nothing, but then in a small voice he asks, "What did she do?"

The timid way in which he asks the question tells Shouta that he probably shouldn't be here anymore. Yagi has successfully brought Izuku down from his high-strung state, and he doesn't even know that it was because of him that he was up there in the first place. Now, as the conversation has shifted, Shouta gets the sense that this is more private. It's not really for him to hear.

As long as Izuku is alright, he thinks he's okay to leave. He will always trust him when he's in Yagi's hands.

Giving a nod in their general direction, Shouta carefully finds his way to the door and puts a hand on that vibrating device Power Loader made for him to help with navigating.

Maybe he'll be able to get that nap in after all.

Katsuki has been rough since the day he was born. He's well aware of this fact, and he's not ashamed of it—his family is just loud in general, minus his dad, and that's not inherently a bad thing.

It was worse in elementary school, however, and he had to pay for the deep rooted issues he had. Izuku left, he only ever had that one group of annoying 'friends' who would just follow him around like snobby ducks, and he finally learned what it was like to be alone.

He figured out what it was like to be Izuku.

Therapy helped, and though he wasn't happy about it at first, it was ordered by his doctor at the time shortly after Auntie's disappearance due to the increasing number of incidents caused by him at school.

Sure, he's still loud and gritty, but that's fine. It's just who he is. What therapy did was allow him to better *control* his outbursts and prevent more from happening. He has a short fuse at best, and working through anger management courses back then has helped him to regulate his unexplained anger.

He went from having uncontrollable, chronic frustration and expressions of rage to feeling more in control of his everyday life. He felt *freer*.

But something that has never failed to piss him off and put those past sessions to work is, unsurprisingly, Izuku.

He never hated him. But sometimes he felt like he did.

And now, watching Izuku walk out of a classroom with his head hanging, All Might right beside him and speaking to him quietly—Katsuki thinks to himself that he hasn't felt this much rage since back then.

His fists close tightly by his sides, and he grits his teeth as he breathes in heavily through the nose. He has a reason to be angry, but he knows he has to calm himself down.

Izuku is just the most stupid, irritating person to ever fucking exist.

All Might messes up Izuku's hair and bends down to impart on him another encouraging thought, and afterwards he leaves in the opposite direction. He brings his phone to his ear as he scurries away, telling Katsuki he has another important meeting soon.

Katsuki is stalking out from around the corner towards Izuku long before he even turns to look at him.

Of course, Izuku isn't surprised at his presence. He never is by anyone anymore. "Why are you mad?" He asks, a lot quieter than Katsuki appreciates. "I thought you'd be happy now that someone else finally knows."

His neutral tone honestly just pisses off Katsuki more. His friend is

catching an attitude already, he can tell.

Good. Now I won't feel as bad about ripping into your dumbass.

"Really? You think this is some kind of victory for me?" He hisses, and his hand is reaching forward, attempting to grab him, but Izuku folds his arms, expression shadowed, and an invisible barrier comes up to block Katsuki.

Honestly, it's a miracle he doesn't blow up half the hallway just because of that.

"It's after school hours. If you don't have permission to be in here, you could get in trouble," Izuku tells him, as if he doesn't see the fat ass elephant spanning from floor to ceiling in the hallway beside them.

"Like I give a fuck," Katsuki fumes. He sidesteps the barrier and grabs the back of Izuku's shirt, dragging him to the first empty classroom he sees. Which is a lot nicer than he could be right now—he could just hash this out right here for everyone and their mothers to see.

Except Izuku doesn't budge. For a boy who's a few inches shorter than Katsuki and looks like he just dug out from his own grave, he's pretty strong.

"I don't have time for this right now, Kacchan," Izuku tells him, and his hand comes up to rest on Katsuki's wrist, which is holding onto his shirt. His scarred palm slides up Katsuki's forearm almost reassuringly, and it's so soft that goosebumps rise from beneath the blond's skin.

Katsuki shudders and yanks his arm away, chest tight. "Oh, you don't have time for this but you had time to lie and cheat your way into getting into this shitty ass school in the first place, huh, Deku?"

Izuku flinches, and hurt flashes so clearly across his face that Katsuki almost regrets it. "What are you talking about? You wanted me to go here. You *begged* me to apply with you."

"Because I thought it would knock some sense into that dumb fucking skull of yours and make you tell someone about what was going on back home." Katsuki's face is a few inches from Izuku's now, and he notices the way Izuku's gaze flicks back and forth between his eyes. "Or what *wasn't* back home, right?"

The shock on Izuku's face melts away, replaced with something Katsuki is more familiar with: *anger*.

He's always aching for these kinds of fights with his friend, even when they're painful. There's something about seeing his own pain and rage reflected in Izuku's eyes that makes the ropes around Katsuki's lungs loosen.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Izuku snaps, closing the distance between them so they're brushing against each other now. Without looking, he sends an air shot into the ceiling to destroy the camera blinking at them. "I told you—they all know now, so you can stop worrying when you don't need to!"

"You tried to *leave."* His voice cracks painfully on the last word, and he shuts his mouth for a moment before trying again. "You didn't tell me that part, but you didn't need to. That's why Sensei has that blindfold on, isn't it? 'Cause you wanted to run and he wouldn't let you?"

Izuku's bruised jaw is set. There's a smoldering fire existing in the depths of his emerald eyes, and Katsuki holds it like he does his own explosions. "If you stopped assuming shit maybe you wouldn't be so pissed off all the time, Kacchan," he hisses, moving to shoulder past him.

Katsuki follows. "You didn't say I was wrong. And it's because I'm *not.* Do you think for one goddamn second that I'd care about anyone else knowing about All for One if it meant you left?"

"I don't know, that's all you've been hounding me on for the past, what is it, three years now? It's hard to tell." He glares at him. "And keep that name *out* of your mouth when we're here."

Katsuki pushes in front of him, jabbing a finger in his face. "You're pretty fucking annoying for someone who already got their ass kicked once this week. And why the fuck does it matter? You said everybody knows, so what—"

"You know why!" And with that, Izuku's discolored hands shove against Katsuki's chest, sending him stumbling back two feet. "The heroes shouldn't have found out anyway, but they did! Sure, whatever, I tried to run, but—but I thought I would—I would get *hurt* if I didn't, you idiot! So *get over it!* I'm here, I didn't make it out, and you got what you wanted, right? *Right?"* He doesn't wait for a response. "Why are you even starting this? Just looking for an excuse like you always do?"

"I don't need an excuse. You do enough dumb shit to fuel me for life."

“That’s great! Now *drop it!”* Izuku storms down the length of the hallway they’re in, and Katsuki spots the faintest red sparks licking up his body.

He stays where he is, fists clenched and legs spread wide in a defensive position. “What if you did manage to get outta here, huh? What would you have done then, knowing you’d have to leave everything behind?” Katsuki’s fear melts into bitterness. “What, you’d have just left the hag and my old man? You’d have left Sensei? And *Missy?”*

You’d have left me?

Katsuki doesn’t say it aloud, but Izuku must hear it, because he stops in his tracks and breathes in deeply. Exhaustion and guilt leak into the space between them, and Katsuki drowns in it.

When Izuku turns, the air vent above him blows his hair in front of his face, revealing patches of white. His eyes, usually so expressive and caring when facing Katsuki, now glitter like ships far off the coast of a blackened sea. “You still don’t get it, do you?” He whispers, his own bitterness shining through.

“There’s nothing you could know that I wouldn’t have understood before you,” Katsuki hisses, but he bites anyway, stepping closer to hear what his idiot friend has to say.

“I should not be here right now. Do you—do you *see* that? Kacchan… the moment I realized Nezu had read it all, I thought I would be hurt. I thought—no, I was so *sure* that it was all over. Best case scenario? I would be thrown into Tartarus. Locked away, with—with quirk drugs being pumped in me, steel suppressant cuffs around my wrists and ankles, chained to the floor of the darkest *fucking* level in that prison, for the rest of my days. And the worst case?” Izuku grabs his own shirt, and it’s then Katsuki notices the new cuts on his palms. The scars are dark and angry—he wonders what happened but also doesn’t want to ask for fear of his thoughts coming true. “I’d be killed. On. The. Spot. The very moment I let my guard down or—or believed for one second that they *wouldn’t.”*

Katsuki stares, brows furrowed tight. “You really think the teachers would have let that happen to you?”

Izuku laughs, but it’s not funny. It’s sharp and aching and much too rough on the ears, nothing like the warm laugh he usually gets. “Kacchan, they’d be the ones doing it.”

“But they didn’t! You’re *fucked* in the head, Deku! You keep thinking they’re all out to harm you when they’ve shown time and time again that—!”

“I said we’re not talking about this right now!” Izuku warns. He starts away again in a fervor, red sparks growing more consuming.

Katsuki’s lips curl up, and the shout that comes out of him is guttural, bouncing off the walls. “Stop running away for once in your goddamn *life* and *face me!”*

No sooner have the words left his mouth than Izuku is right in front of him, advancing on him like a wolf does a rabbit. “You think I run because I’m scared of what they'd do to me? You think I don’t already know what it feels like to be killed or—or locked away in some faraway place where no one can find me?”

Katsuki remembers nights when Izuku would whimper in his sleep, curled up and shaking on the floor beside the blond’s bed. Nights when Katsuki would do nothing but sit with his knees to his chest on the mattress as his friend battled with countless demons eating away at his brain.

“You think I *care* about that shit?” Izuku lifts his chin up, and this close to him now Katsuki sees the way his eyes are red and irritated. He needs his eye drops. “I run when I don’t think I’ll win, yeah. I run when I think they’ll find me out. But not because I’m scared of being caught. It’s because I’m scared of what that would mean for *you.* And Auntie, and Masaru, and Missy, and—and my *brother.”* He slams a fist against Katsuki’s chest, but it’s not forceful enough to hurt. “And *Mom.”*

The mention of Inko has Katsuki’s throat tightening. He holds Izuku’s wild gaze, deathly silent, as the boy continues, words dark and wobbly.

“I have fought too hard and cried too many fucking times when he wasn’t looking to not get somewhere with my life, Kacchan. I got my freedom, and I don’t give a shit how little it is. I just can’t lose it. Because if I lose it this time, I’ll never get it back. And I’ll never see you again. I’d never get to protect *her.* Even though I—I promised.” Izuku shakes his head. “It’s not about me. I know I can’t be helped. But—I just have to do my part to make up for everything so far. And I can’t do that if I’m locked away.”

“Is that why you haven’t told them all of it?” Katsuki grunts, thinking

of the text messages Izuku sent him previously. “Because you think they’ll turn eventually?”

Izuku wipes his face. “All Might can’t know any of it. But the others—I’ve told them some. I can’t tell them all the things I’ve seen or—or done yet or else I—I know they won’t let me fight. I just know it.”

“So, what? You’re just going to tell them little tiny details every now and then, just enough to help the investigation along and not put you in Tartarus? And all the while you’ll still be planning shit yourself?”

This time, Izuku sounds soft, like he’s trying to placate Katsuki. He looks away, towards the window. “Sensei and I came to a… sort of mutual agreement. If I finish up this semester… and take the midterm, and *pass* it… they’ll let me stop school. That way, I’ll have enough free time to do what I need to.”

The words don’t register at first to Katsuki. The boy blinks once, twice, and then jolts back as if Izuku’s mere presence hurts him. “What?”

“I have a duty to the Club now, Kacchan. I’m getting stronger than ever, and I have these new quirks I need to figure out, and I have the Commission to deal with, and I still need to finish up my mission with the Yakuza, to get that girl out of there, and—I just can’t do all of that when I’m here.”

Some small part of Katsuki knew this already. He understands wholly. And he even approves of it. But the larger side of Katsuki, the jealous, protective, and *angry* side, absolutely hates the very thought of Izuku leaving him in this school.

“What about *our* agreement, huh?” He asks, hands throwing up, his palms sticky with sweat. “We were supposed to do this together! That’s what *you* promised *me!”*

“I’m not going to leave you,” Izuku whispers, and it’s said like a law, like a decree. He shifts on his feet, cheeks reddening with something acrid like regret. “I just… I need to get this stuff done. After that, I’m yours. Just like I’ve always been. I promise.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Kacchan.”

“You’re going to run away. It might not be right now, or tomorrow, or

next week, but you will. I know it. You can't *tell* me I'm wrong when I'm *fucking* not."

Izuku's face is shadowed, and he makes no move to correct him. "Stop it," he says, defeated, but he doesn't say anything more.

He knows it would be futile.

The heroes may have been fooled. Izuku may have been able to convince them. He may have been able to lie and say he wouldn't leave again. But Katsuki knows him better than anyone else, and he knows that Izuku is tired and *needs* out of this place, out of this situation.

Izuku tries so hard to fix things so quickly because he knows he can't go on for much longer. He wants to end things, even if it means killing himself in the process. Katsuki knows this as surely as the sun rises each morning. It's so obvious to him.

Even though Izuku has done what Katsuki has always wanted, even though Izuku has *finally* broken down and told someone, multiple people, heroes he can actually trust, about his worst nightmares—he still won't stop. He still won't slow down.

And Katsuki doesn't know what to do anymore. Because it'll never, ever be enough. Not when Izuku seems to think he has no time left.

He stalks away, veins on fire, blood burning, and feels Izuku's sorrow swallow him whole.

Katsuki has never hated someone as dearly as he does his best friend. And he knows in the very core of his being that Izuku has never loved someone as cruelly as he does him.

Cracks of thunder shake the entire apartment.

Izuku's window, now slightly cracked from an hour or two earlier when he threw his Rabbit mask against it, vibrates with each strike.

The only thing louder than this storm is his guardian arguing. Aizawa

—no, *Shouta* is shouting over the phone in the living room. Something about orders not being processed correctly and patrols being messed up at his agency. It's obvious Shouta's absence has been hell for his coworkers.

Now, Izuku is not supposed to eavesdrop. Shouta disapproves of it and often chastises him for it, but the boy does it anyway. He needs something to focus on other than his wretched thoughts.

He sits with his cheek against the vent hatch like he always does, not caring about the lines it'll brand onto his skin.

"—call me constantly and yet I feel like nothing is ever resolved!" Shouta snaps, and Izuku thinks that his voice itself is what's rattling the windows. "What makes you think I want anything to do with that? You know damn well that's not because of— *what?* What he did wasn't necessary or even—shut up for a second!" He scoffs. "Oh, that's the excuse? Tell him to shove it right up his—!"

Izuku holds Missy in his arms as the storm grows both inside the house and out. It hasn't stopped since the *incident.* Izuku doesn't know when it will.

A door opens in the middle of Shouta's conversation, and Izuku stares at the wall sightlessly: Hizashi has returned home, and quickly he joins in on the arguing too once Shouta hangs up the phone.

Izuku hates that. He thought they resolved their differences a month ago when Shouta was forced to sleep on the couch for a week.

When the walls shake, this time from slammed doors, Missy rubs her head against Izuku's chest. They are two little things, holding each other as they navigate through the dark.

He isn't sure how long they stay like that. He only knows that eventually he finds himself pushing a hand into the hole under his bed frame, finding the pack of cigarettes he's hidden far inside—even past where his notebook and medicines were.

He uses his window to climb to the roof, holding a Present Mic umbrella out as he goes. He's had the pack hidden away for a long while—so long, in fact, that he completely forgot about it. It was never for himself. Back before he met Eraserhead, he would carry cigarettes during his patrol to calm civilians and villains down after a fight. Despite not ever making a habit to smoke them, he's still kept them.

And tonight he just can't do this.

He can't drink anymore—he promised he wouldn't. And besides, he doesn't want to, deep down. He hated how he would act each time he did. Shouta's words are poison in his mind, reminding him of the consequences of breaking his sobriety, so he goes for the next best choice.

There are no stars out, just as always. His hands are shaking from the cold and something else he doesn't wish to identify, and he carefully holds the pack to the light, glaring at it. It's a familiar brand. He can recite it by heart, as his mother began to smoke shortly after he turned four. She never did it around him, but when she came home from work late, he could sometimes pick out the Marlboro menthol smell on her, partially covered up by cheap perfume.

He lights one up, scared somehow, but doesn't actually bring it to his lips. He's only smoked twice before in his life, and it hurt his lungs and made him gag so hard the second time that he vowed to never do it again. So he just watches the embers fall and imagines they're shooting stars, like he's back with Kacchan and they're sneaking out into the backyard of his house after much convincing from Izuku. Like they're on the cold grass looking at mute, dark clouds in the middle of the night.

But even the smell soon becomes too much. He snuffs it out and shuts his eyes, feeling the rain on his legs. He clutches the pack tightly, bringing it up to his nose just to smell the faint menthol. It's not good, and he knows it, but with the smooth smell comes memories of his mother.

Is he a wuss for not being able to do it? Or is he being a better kid than he was before? Drinking was easier in some respects. He could pour liquor into a cat mug and pretend, at least in his mind, that it was some sort of sour juice. But with smoking, you can't do that. There's no way to trick your mind and make it better than it is.

"Go ahead and give me that," a voice says behind him, and Izuku looks back with wide, guilty eyes.

Hizashi has a black umbrella in his hand and a jacket in the other. He fiddles with his hearing aids for a second to account for the heavy rain and walks up beside Izuku. God, he was so upset he didn't even pay attention to the feel of him coming.

"I—I didn't—"

Hizashi just shakes his head, and Izuku's heart drops. Hizashi is unusually tame, like he's tired. The man sits beside him, legs hanging over, and moves his own large umbrella to cover Izuku more.

Izuku swallows in the silence, unable to take it. "I didn't smoke any, I swear. I—I just—I like the smell."

"I know, kiddo, I was watching. Relax. You're not in trouble or nothing." When Izuku hands the pack over obediently, Hizashi lights one up after taking his lighter too.

Izuku isn't quick enough to stop the shocked gasp from erupting out of his chest. "Wha—sir, your quirk! I thought your lungs can't handle—"

Hizashi takes a puff, seeming to relax some. "We've all got some part of ourselves we want to hurt," he says, glancing at Izuku before putting it out. "But as long as we don't make it a habit."

The words hit Izuku hard, and the boy lets the rain ruin the rest of what he was going to say to justify his actions.

"How long have you had them?" Hizashi asks eventually.

"A couple days after you guys let me stay here." Izuku fidgets. "Sorry. I know I'm not allowed to have this kinda stuff in the house."

"Did you forget you had it after a while?" At Izuku's nod, Hizashi shrugs. "Then don't worry about it. It's not that big of a deal if you weren't smoking them."

Isn't it, though? Izuku can't help but wonder.

But the voice hero doesn't comment on it again, so Izuku lets it go. His mind wanders to the things Kacchan told him earlier that day, and he curls in on himself.

"What's wrong, kiddo?" Hizashi asks, always observant.

Izuku pauses, unsure how to phrase this. "Don't you ever get… sad?"

Hizashi stares at him, one eyebrow raised. "Sometimes. Why do you ask?"

"I dunno. I just—I guess I feel cheated sometimes."

"By who?"

Izuku gestures towards the dark sky. “Whoever’s up there.”

His teacher’s face softens just a fraction, and he listens patiently as Izuku rambles on.

“It’s like… we live in an age of amazing quirks. We have these beautiful powers and such nice technology. And—and knowledge people could only theorize about centuries ago, you know? And it’s… I kinda want more.” Izuku continues quickly, trying to reassure the hero. “And I know it’s selfish, I get that. I don’t deserve it, I know I don’t. But… I was born too late to be able to explore the world. Everything is mostly already documented, besides the ocean still, and I’m *not* stepping foot in the ocean…”

Hizashi smiles, and Izuku finishes with his chest loosening up, hand pointed to the heavens.

“But even then, I was still born too early to explore all of *that.”*

“The stars?” At Izuku’s wonderous hum, Hizashi tips his head back and follows his gaze. “I don’t know what you’d want to explore about some huge balls of fire. Not much to do but look.”

“That’s all I’d want to do,” Izuku assures. He swallows the sudden lump that has returned in his throat, and he buries his face in his knees, his next whisper so heart wrenchingly quiet. “I just wanna be anywhere but here.”

For a long time, Hizashi mulls over the words, and when he sighs, a small cloud escapes his mouth and is immediately killed by the heavy rain. “I think, kiddo, that there’s a difference between experiencing something for yourself and reading about it. If you want to go explore, to go out of the country or something, say, after all of this is done… I think you might enjoy it. Maybe not as much as actually getting launched into *space…”*

It’s Izuku’s turn to smile.

“But enough to not feel as stuck as you are.” Hizashi lowers his voice almost secretively. “And, kiddo, I don’t think I’d blame you for leaving. Not for that.”

“You wouldn’t be upset?”

Hizashi’s knuckles brush against his shoulder teasingly. “Oh, of course I’d be upset. I wouldn’t get to see you every day like I do now.” His

smile lessens some. “But knowing you’re happier would make me happy, too. And you know what else?”

He leans in close, and Izuku looks into his shining spiral eyes. The glare of the city lights are reflected on the man’s glasses.

“I’d be really, *really* proud.”

The words do something funny to Izuku. His throat closes up, and his lips part as if to say something, but he can’t conjure up anything worthwhile. His gut hurts, and he has to lean back to prevent himself from falling right off the roof.

He is nine years old and quiet. His birthday comes and goes, like every year since he’s been with his father, but Mitsuki is there. She crouches down and hugs Izuku tight, cheek squished against his. They’re all at a nice restaurant somewhere in the city, and he’s in nice traditional clothing designed by Masaru himself.

“Your mother would’ve loved to see you like this, kid,” she whispers in his ear, and she sounds choked up.

Izuku fights not to hug her back, but he still finds himself whispering, all wobbly and exhausted, “I think I’m too far away from her for her to be happy, Auntie.”

“Nonsense, hon.” She cups his cheeks and looks him in the face. Her red eyes, usually hot and fiery, are soft and sweet like a candied apple. “The farther you go, the prouder she is. Don’t you ever think otherwise.”

Hizashi taps Izuku on the shoulder before rising to his feet. “We should get out of the storm, don’t you think? Let’s head inside.”

Izuku follows, listening to the thrum of rain against his umbrella. As they walk down the stairs from the roof, Izuku asks, “Are you and Shouta okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“I just… earlier, y’know. I figured…”

Hizashi seems to understand what he’s saying now. “Yeah, we’re okay, kiddo.” He gives a sheepish look, teeth glinting when he smiles. “I’m gonna have to buy you some earplugs so you won’t have to listen to us argue like that.”

“I’d really rather you not fight at all,” Izuku says quietly, even though he feels it’s his own fault his guardians are acting this way.

“I know. And I’m sorry about that, son. We argue over certain things because we have different views on how to handle stuff, but that’s alright. We don’t… *dislike* each other or anything because of it. I think we’re both just a little hard-headed.” Hizashi leads Izuku down the hallway to their door. “We’ll work harder on it, though, so it’s not affecting you, alright?”

“It’s okay.”

Hizashi says nothing, but his hand feels a little heavier when he rests it on Izuku’s head and steers him back inside, taking the umbrella from him too in order to dry it.

The two of them leave the cigarettes and ugly confessions behind, never to be brought up again.

Izuku steps inside the classroom with a small pink box held carefully in his hands. He walks forward stiffly, hiding his face behind the cardboard, and Kan leans back in his chair with his arms crossed upon noticing him.

“What’s that?” he asks, and Izuku holds it tighter against his chest, heart beating loudly.

“A cake,” he mumbles.

Kan studies him for a moment, his fangs shining in the fluorescent lighting; Izuku wonders briefly if they ever used to cut him back when he was younger and clumsier.

“Why?” Kan asks.

“Because I broke your mug.” At this, Kan’s expression changes a little. Surprise flits across his features, making his eyebrows rise, but he just as quickly smoothes his emotions down, allowing Izuku to continue. “And because I used my quirks against you.” He winces. “And Sensei’s quirk.”

Kan sniffs at the memory, and he rolls forward to look inside the box when Izuku carefully places it down on the desk, avoiding his gaze.

“You know,” the hero tells him after a while, “I don't really like cake.”

“It's not for you,” Izuku says, managing to hold back a little bit of his impatience even though he knows Kan is lying anyway. “It’s for your dog.”

Saying this, he digs in his pocket and procures a slightly crumpled paper listing the various dog-safe ingredients that went into it. Vlad King’s intrigue increases exponentially, and he opens the box to smell it as he takes the paper from Izuku and reads it over, nodding to himself.

“Wow,” he says after a while. He looks at Izuku then, seeming to mull over something. “A lot of work went into this.”

Izuku doesn’t say anything. He spent all night making this in the kitchen at the apartment, and Shouta walked in on him crouching on top of the counter mixing the batter at around four in the morning, though he didn’t question it.

He just stood there for a few moments listening to Izuku’s rambling, got a drink of water, and meandered his way back to bed as best he could.

Kan closes the box and places it off to the side after seeming to reach some conclusion. “I’ll let her try it,” he says, like a judge making a ruling, “and if she likes it, I’ll see if we can find the time to talk.”

Feeling blessed, Izuku nods gratefully and turns around, planning to leave quickly before Kan changes his mind.

“But for the record,” the blood hero continues gruffly, “I don’t blame you for what happened.” Izuku turns back, and Kan lifts his gaze to meet his wide eyes. “I was angry, sure, and maybe I still am in some way,” he says with a one-shoulder shrug, “but… I get it now.”

Those few words at the end make Izuku tremble. He grabs his shaking arm to support himself and nods again. “Thank you,” he says, dipping his head low, and his voice quivers a little when he adds, “sensei.”

Vlad King gestures to the door, so Izuku doesn’t hesitate before making his leave.

He's being treated a lot nicer than his younger self ever imagined, and his goal now is to pay this kindness forward.

It's something his mother would tell him to do.

"Whatever that is, I don't want it," Shouta says, and Izuku freezes in the doorway. The classroom is empty and quiet—has been for a half hour. Izuku knows his teacher is working, but he needs to do this now or else he will lose the nerve.

"You haven't even seen it," he points out quietly, holding the plant carefully.

"I don't need to. I know it's nothing good."

Izuku walks closer, chewing on his inner cheek. "Hound Dog said I should do this," he explains. "It's… supposed to help, I think. Since I have, like, issues with—with talking. He said."

Shouta pauses the audio he was listening to with a verbal command and turns his attention to Izuku fully. "Help with what exactly?"

Izuku hesitates. He has issues saying things aloud—he just said that. Can Shouta keep up? Or maybe it's that he's forcing Izuku to say it aloud. The boy shifts uncomfortably, reminding himself that this is his teacher, and that he cares (he's shown it time and time again, just as Kacchan said), so he should trust him enough for this.

"So I don't… hurt anyone again," he settles on. "By continuing to—to feel like this."

"Like what?"

Izuku is grateful the man isn't looking at him directly—the intensity of his words is already enough to make him cringe; he can't imagine how much worse having to meet his eyes would be. "Bad," he says rather awkwardly. *Worthless, maybe.*

The silence stretches on until Izuku thinks he might just implode with the weight of it.

“You do know that I’ve already forgiven you, right?” Shouta says, tipping his head and allowing curls to fall in front of his face. “I’ve said it multiple times.”

“You shouldn’t’ve forgiven me,” Izuku mumbles, not intending for him to hear.

“Well, good thing you can’t decide that for me.”

Knowing there’s nothing else to say to change his mind, Izuku slides the pot over the desk to Shouta to allow him to feel it. When he does, he lets out a surprised grunt.

“So, this is an apology plant?”

“Yes.” He averts his gaze to the floor. “Because I hurt you and was difficult.”

Shouta shakes his head. “You don’t need to apologize to me anymore, kid.”

“This will be the last time.”

The underground hero sighs, feeling more of the plant leaves. He has a new blindfold on today, this one allowing just a little more light through—he’s healing up. Finally, he lifts a hand. “Alright. You better make sure it is.”

The soft acceptance is all Izuku needs to hear. Relief rushes through him, and he’s happy to see that Shouta actually looks to enjoy the plant and isn’t just saying this to make Izuku feel better. The last thing Izuku wants is to make this whole thing seem like it’s just for his own benefit—when in reality everything he does is for others.

He walks away, feeling a little lighter, only to stop dead when Shouta grinds out, *“Wait.”*

The sudden stern tone has Izuku freezing, and when he turns to look at him, Shouta is pulling off his blindfold to reveal puffy, bloodshot eyes. He stares at the plant and sniffs it, crinkling the leaves.

And then he jerks back like it’s burned him.

Izuku notices it at the same time that Shouta seems to.

“Tell me,” Shouta says lowly, now glaring at Izuku and slowly rising from his chair, “that this *isn’t* cannabis.”

Now, Izuku has made many dumb blunders in his life, but he thinks that this may just take the cake. He's so flabbergasted by his own stupidity and ignorance that he can't even answer Shouta—his mouth opens and closes, but no sound ever erupts.

He asked Kaida to retrieve the pot from his last remaining safe house that morning—pot, as in, a potted plant. One of the multiple pots Izuku used for the new seeds he planted when he first started working with Eraserhead.

He told her to grab one of the pots, not *the* pot. Why the fuck did she think he wanted the weed? She knows he lives with heroes now!

Izuku stares at Shouta, whose red eyes are zeroed in on him, and his stomach ties into knots when he sees his teacher reach for his capture weapon.

Well, so much for that being his last apology.

Chapter End Notes

> im not abandoning my other works! im still working on them but rn i wanna get this one done bc it's been 3.5 years of it and that's rlly long sry y'all lmao. after this one, my other fics (and future ones im excited to share) will receive the same love I dedicate to this one. ill post some sneak peeks of those future ones on my tiktok :) stay goated y'all 🐰
>
> i know you - faye webster
>
> next chap is more interesting :) i think y'all will like it. it's one of my favorites and will rlly get things moving. sry for the unexpected bkdk angst. just kinda comes out of me
>
> a

heavy dusk

Chapter Notes

> fnaf movie was great idc what ppl say. it was clearly made for fans so it was enjoyable. i was geeking out so hard the whole time
>
> cw: drowning, self-harm, attempted suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku's dreams have changed. He isn't sure why.

Normally, he closes his eyes after downing a sleeping pill and wakes up in the depths of his domain inside Extract. He tries his luck at breaching One for All's barrier, and he is unsuccessful each time. He's used to the rejection by now, but it still doesn't make it any easier when the writhing pool of sludge refuses to let him in for the nth time.

Lately, however, he does not wake up in his realm. He wakes up directly inside the bridge between both worlds, and he loiters around in All for One's soul. It scares him, really, how he stopped minding it after only the third time. It scares him that he stopped flinching as much as he did when he first arrived here.

Three nights after Izuku was cleared by Recovery Girl, he goes to sleep and wakes up someplace else, someplace that he can't identify immediately.

He is in a field of hyacinths and lilies, warmth beating down on his face. The tall grass reaches his knees, brushing against his skin softly with the breeze. He smells sweet sap in the distance, and if he strains he can hear bees buzzing all around him.

Where is he? He's not inside One for All, is he? There's no way: he was kicked out. Did he accidentally wake up in his own little realm inside it? That can't be it either—he would feel the other users if he did.

So just how far is he in his father's realm? Where is the void he's grown so accustomed to? Somehow the idea of this warmth existing inside All for One's mind is sadder than anything else he's ever experienced.

“What happened?”

The quiet voice comes from behind. Izuku pauses, eyes widening a fraction, his breath escaping him in a soft sigh. It can’t be, he thinks, but his mind tells him it’s so, and when he turns around, his eyes confirm it.

Midoriya Izuku stands before him, except he’s small and bandaged, holding onto a blackened plushie. He is smaller than even Izuku remembers being at seven years old.

His large eyes are a blinding green, and his hair is a mess. Bruises peek out from under his shirt, littering his neck and wrists. Gloves reside on his hands, and Izuku only stares.

“Did we get in trouble again?” His younger self asks, all curious and confused, and Izuku holds his own arm tight, swaying as the wind picks up. He realizes why the question is asked a moment later, as blood drips down from his face and stains the beautiful peonies beneath him, soaking into the dirt as easily as if it were water.

He touches his cheek, and when he pulls his fingers away, they’re wet and red.

How did Izuku get here again? He can’t remember, and it scares him. He always remembers.

“We should try harder,” the young boy says, almost as if chastising. His eyes follow the red. “Father said so.”

The uncomfortable feeling of the blood matting all over his body and sticking his clothes to his skin, coupled with the sudden searing heat of the sun directly overhead, makes Izuku’s heart race. His head throbs, and blood pounds in his ears, drowning out the sounds of whatever his young companion is saying next.

The boy’s head tips, a concerned lilt to his voice now. Izuku wonders what he’s saying. Would it have made a difference if he knew? Would Izuku still have grown so angry if he heard him?

Pain rocks through his body, electrifying his nerves and racing up his spine. Bruises appear on his freckled skin, and it’s like he’s being beaten, though there is no attacker he can see. It sparks some flavor of rage within him. The weirdness of the situation, the change in his dream, the hurt, the *look* on his younger self’s face—fuck, for some reason it makes him so angry, so bitter, that he’s actually numb now.

There's no thought in his brain, as static has taken over and ruined the warm edges of this environment.

He takes a step forward, then another, bare feet sinking into the dirt.

The young boy holds out the burnt plushie as an offer, frowning slightly. "Why haven't we tried harder?" He breathes quietly, still so innocent, and Izuku can't take the ringing anymore.

He stands nearly two feet taller than him, and he reaches a hand down, hovering over his head of curls for a moment before dropping it and gripping his scalp. He feels like his insides have grown too large in the few seconds since he's been here, and he will soon split apart at the seams.

Why? Izuku hears in his head, again and again. *Why didn't we? What did we do?*

This cannot be real. Perhaps Izuku is nowhere, not in Extract, not in All for One, not in One for All. He exists in the space between all living things, just barely skirting by. This Izuku in his hold is a fake, some poor reimagination of who he really is.

The child gasps, but it's quiet, as if he's been conditioned to never make a sound. The plushie drops and disappears into the bloody mound of gardenias, and when Izuku begins to drag the fake along behind him with one hand, he sees him reach for it unsuccessfully.

But this must be another reimagination, too, another mistake. How sick is he to be dreaming of this? How angry must he be in real life to be thinking of this shit?

He sees a pond full of koi and lily pads, and Izuku reaches it with a deathly sort of silence reverberating in his brain.

Nails dig into Izuku's arms and scrabble against him when he pushes the boy under, forcing him beneath the water. Blood mixes with cerulean, and the thrashing scares away the fish. Izuku stares at his rippled reflection until the blood makes it impossible to do so anymore, and he only becomes more angry at how easy this all is.

His vision blurs, and his limbs shake.

If it were the real Izuku fighting back, if it were him writhing and screaming under the surface instead, would it make a difference in how he feels? Would he feel less certain?

But the roles have always been reversed, haven't they? So it's not a fair comparison. It doesn't even matter.

As Izuku holds him down, he watches his little self change; his body distorts, converting into the smoky version of his normal One for All counterpart. But it's a fake, too, of course. Izuku does not sense the things he should here—this is all in his mind, and he just wants to wake up. He thought killing the younger image of himself would do the trick, but he's not there yet. It's harder for him to keep this version of Izuku at bay, but he manages by using Black Whip to squeeze his throat and force him to breathe in the water engulfing him.

Izuku isn't sure how long exactly he crouches there holding the figure under, but all he knows is he is ripped away sometime near the end of it.

A blur of gold blinds him as harshly as the sun, and then he's flung back a few yards. He doesn't recognize the newcomer at first, but then the wispy figure straightens up after yanking the other Izuku out of the pond, and the realization hits him.

He cowers upon meeting the eyes of All Might's vestige, skin prickling. The yellow smoke, vibrant with energy, falls to the floor and spreads out, reaching Izuku's feet. It cannot be his master's true One for All self, but it's so similar that for a moment Izuku is on the fence about it.

His confusion dissipates when Yagi begins to whisk around the trembling body of the fake, entirely helpless.

Panics floods him. No. No, *no.* He didn't kill him, did he? He didn't kill that little boy.

This isn't real, so it shouldn't matter, but it *does* now that All Might has gone and *seen* it. Izuku's lungs feel full, and every breath is like shards of glass going down his bronchial tubes. Is this what it felt like? Izuku has been drowned before, and it felt something like this, but he never imagined it would actually feel real to a *fake.*

Izuku is on his knees, blood frozen in his body, horror making a home in his gut. He reaches forward, attempting to unkill himself, but he never finished what he started in the first place.

The fake coughs, sputtering to life, and Izuku's chest loosens. Yagi helps the boy to his feet and leads him away, leaving Izuku behind with only a singular dead-eyed glance in his direction. Fear replaces

Izuku's uncertainty, bringing with it guilt. Why is Yagi looking at *him* now? Why is he caring for that fake when the real Izuku is right here, looking through *actual* eyes? Izuku doesn't get it.

Why would Yagi care about some false extension of Izuku? Sure, this Yagi is just as fake as *that* Izuku, but it still hurts. Why would *any* version of Yagi act this way?

"He seemed angry."

The flowers around him extend, wrapping around his limbs and poking through his bones with polite thorns. He doesn't feel it—he continues to stare at All Might's retreating back, trying to reconcile with what just happened.

His father's presence is enough to make the vines tighten nearly enough to shatter his bones. The figure is behind him somewhere, but Izuku doesn't see him, nor does he bother searching.

I didn't mean to do it, he wants to say, but he knows that's not quite right. And even then, his master has long since disappeared into the fields with the other Izuku, not keen on listening to excuses. And could Izuku blame him for that?

A cold hand lands on his back. "Why do they always look at you that way?" All for One whispers, the soft words breathed into his ears.

And the boy can say nothing in response.

He doesn't do it on purpose, but he avoids Yagi in the days following the dream.

He is grounded again due to the cannabis incident, so he's been a little restless. He hasn't been able to contact Hawks yet about his official response to the Commission, and time is ticking. Shouta understands this, but he's standing his ground and refusing to let Izuku go out on patrol until his punishment is up.

Which Izuku knows is more than fair, especially considering his *situation.*

So, he is using this time to prepare his body. The third year gyms have amazing holographic simulations to keep his skills sharp. He's messed with the programming to ensure his opponents are higher levels and represent the things Izuku struggles the most with.

On top of that, Izuku is determined to never let his quirks go. He fears being put in suppressant cuffs again or, even worse, being injected. If the access to his quirks is gone, he won't be able to help the way he needs to. He needs to be able to continue functioning even in the circumstance that he's been hit with a suppressant dart.

And the only way to ensure that is to expose himself to it.

It's a scary thing, really. *Voluntarily* putting himself in that position. At any moment, he could need his quirks. But he knows he has to do this sometime, and he's at UA currently, so this is as safe as he can be for a while.

He kneels on the mats in the middle of the largest gym at UA, eyes closed and fingers curled around the chains bolting his wrists to the walls. A spring is released, and he feels the first injection make its way into his skin, quickly entering his bloodstream. It's cold, and it numbs his insides as it blocks all of his quirk factors. He shivers, already panicking, but forces himself to breathe slowly in order to concentrate.

Even without Boost or One for All, his body will continue to metabolize quickly, as that's the way he's been conditioned. If he focuses his bodily energy solely into burning through the suppressants, he can decrease the total amount of time in which he's under its effects.

Once he's gotten it down to just a few short seconds, he can up the dosage, which will gradually make him stronger and stronger.

His experiments, however, don't come without consequence. The specific brand of suppressants he's using has nasty side effects, and they're even worse on someone like Izuku—someone with multiple emitter type quirks. Chills wrack his entire body, and he becomes dizzy enough that he doesn't even feel the floor pressing against his knees. He's floating away in all ways but physical, and the chains dig into his skin to keep him on the floor.

Focus. Come on, get a grip. Just breathe.

Nausea overtakes him, and he presses his lips shut when another

spring releases and sends the next dose into his bloodstream.

God, he's gonna fucking throw up.

The walls of the gym are bearing down on him, suffocating him. His skin is too tight over his body, almost like an airtight bag keeping an expandable mattress at bay.

It's only when the fifth injection hits that he feels it—the warm drip of blood down his nose, seeping into the corners of his mouth and dripping onto the mats beneath him. He can't breathe easily now, but he's going to continue on until his body drops.

He needs to get his endurance and strength up if he wants to have any hope of winning a fight against people armed to the teeth with quirk suppressants. Because he has a feeling someone like the heir to the Yakuza *would* have that.

His limbs begin to jerk periodically on their own accord, and Izuku blinks in confusion when the next injection never comes.

"Why aren't you working?" Izuku whispers to himself, slurring just a little. Annoyance springs up inside him, as he thought he fixed up the program. "Didn't I just—"

The chains release him, and Izuku yelps when he drops to his hands and knees. He shakes his head and sees familiar large sneakers in front of him, answering his question.

"You said you were finished with this today," All Might says disapprovingly, and somehow seeing him in his big form right now just makes Izuku more defensive.

He takes a few moments to recuperate before standing up, still wobbly. He wipes his hands on his shirt before turning away from his teacher. "I wanted to keep going for a little longer."

"You're supposed to be training with me in the other gym right now."

"I got distracted."

"You forgot?" Yagi asks, voice level. "Again?"

Izuku lifts a shoulder. "Yeah." Yagi stares for a minute or two, just watching as Izuku wipes off his sweat and lines up his next round of doses. The silence quickly becomes too much for Izuku, who clears his

throat and adds rather lamely, “We might have to reschedule again, if that’s okay.”

The blond crosses his arms. “My boy, you do remember that at the beginning of the school year, you asked for these training days, don’t you? As I recall, you begged me for them.”

This makes Izuku slow in his work. He rewraps the bandages on his fists, not looking at his teacher. “I remember.”

“So, you don’t want to train anymore?”

Izuku frowns. “All Might, I’m training right *now.* Of course I want to.”

“Let me rephrase, then: you don’t want to train with *me* anymore.”

Izuku hesitates, and that’s enough of an answer for All Might. He deflates in one *whoosh,* hurt spreading through the air even when he tries to hide it on his face.

“Young Midoriya,” he begins, and Izuku hates how his voice echoes around the empty gym. “I’m not nearly as dense as some tend to think. It is rather clear to me that you… that you’re *uncomfortable* whenever you’re around me now.” All Might scratches at the back of his head. “I don’t know exactly why that is, but I’m certain it has to do with recent events. And… *things*… that you and the others haven’t told me. But, kid… you need to work with me a little. You need to meet me halfway or this—this will be difficult.”

“I’m trying,” Izuku states quietly, tongue feeling like sandpaper.

Yagi sighs. “Why do you feel the need to overwork your body like this? You’re going to land back in the nurse’s wing if you keep this up.” He walks over and plucks the vial of clear liquid off the table Izuku’s been using. “I’m assuming you were given permission to use this, but even still I’m going to ask you to stop for today.”

Having expected this, Izuku nods curtly and turns to the row of projectors on the wall in the simulation area. If he can’t work on his body’s resistance to quirk suppressants, he will work on more physical aspects. He needs to toughen up his skin even further and ensure he’s not going to split apart from a heavy hit—

“That means stopping *everything.”*

Izuku stops dead, fighting back his irritation. He doesn’t want to be in

Yagi's presence right now. "What am I supposed to do right now if I can't practice?"

"Rest," Yagi says as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"I was asleep for two days straight."

"You were passed out from exhaustion for most of that time," he points out, "I'd hardly call that a healthy sleep."

Izuku refrains from telling him that it was actually the most peaceful sleep he's ever had. *"You* rarely rest," Izuku tries instead.

"I've gotten better these days, and this isn't about me, young man," Yagi chides. "This is about you and not listening. It's dangerous to keep this kind of behavior up."

"Why do they always look at you that way?"

Izuku bores holes into the floor, shutting out the traitorous voice. "Okay. Yeah. I'll—I'll rest."

Before he can actually explode, Izuku picks up his belongings and walks past Yagi to the exit, heart pounding inside his chest. He wants to argue more, but he knows his master is stubborn and will certainly win. Besides, he is a little tired. He wants a jelly pack from that broken vending machine.

When Izuku reaches the handle, though, Yagi calls out to him.

"I have to leave for a few days."

The Earth freezes on its axis, stopping its rotation. Izuku's heart stops along with it. "What?"

"I was informed this morning," he explains in what Izuku can only describe as a somber tone. "A few countries have requested aid. And quickly. They've had an… *outbreak,* I'm afraid."

"Of what? Supervillains?"

"Nomu."

Izuku isn't sure he's heard him correctly at first. Is he still dreaming? He must be, because this isn't right. That doesn't make sense. The Nomu appear and exist in Japan because they're *made* here and are shipped around the island as experiments. It's not possible for a Nomu

to be outside of Japan unless All for One himself has moved with the doctor! And in *multiple* different countries, too?

That can only mean *one* thing.

Izuku swallows and turns around fast, hand clenching his shirt. His bad arm is tingling again, sending pricks throughout his body. “Are they sure they’re Nomu?”

“I’ve seen the footage myself. The few they were able to kill were tested; they have a similar genetic makeup to the ones here.”

The boy moves closer, steps light and fast. “But why haven’t I seen it in the news? And—and why haven't I been told? If there were *Nomu* outside of Japan, I would’ve been told by my clients at the—”

“Think for a moment, my boy,” Yagi says gravely, jaw set. “If word gets out that hero-killing monsters from Japan made it to other nations and started spreading like a plague—what do you think would happen to society?”

Society would descend into a worldwide panic.

Izuku clenches his shirt tighter. Of course his clients don’t have their hands on the information yet—this probably *just* happened, and it’s trying to be kept as quiet as possible. “I… How long will it take?”

“I’m scheduled to be gone for a week, but don’t worry too much, Young Midoriya.” He tries to give a wide, reassuring smile, but it only seems flat. “I can get it done in half that time if I work fast, and I always do.”

“You shouldn’t be going.”

“It’s my duty to help. You know that as well as I do.”

Izuku shakes his head. “Why can’t someone else go? Why does it have to be you?”

“None of the other countries in the council are willing to send out their heroes.”

“Okay, but if they need you specifically for your speed and power, which is what I’m assuming, why can’t someone like Endeavor go instead? You—you need to stay *here.* What if something happens to Japan while you’re gone?”

“In the event something happens, I will be on my way back no matter what the situation looks like where I am,” Yagi soothes. “That’s always been the protocol.”

“That still doesn’t explain why it can’t be Endeavor or some other S or A rank pro instead of—”

Yagi sighs. “These new Nomu seem to be based on water quirks. Their elements put Endeavor and the others at a major disadvantage already.”

“That’s discrediting him. He’s fought water villains before with no problem—”

“No, Midoriya. Most of them are *made* out of some kind of reinforced gelatinous liquid, meaning they have a higher resistance to heat. Which also means Endeavor would be fighting quirkless against them, at least offensively. He has the strength to beat them, sure, but it puts him at major risk if another villain decides to get the jump on him when he can’t access his flames. And in a foreign country with no backup, it could spell out a disaster for him and everyone else.” Yagi shakes his head to match Izuku, blond strands falling in his face. “Hawks can’t pierce their outer layers with even his sharpest feathers, and neither can Best Jeanist with his threads. Mirko and Edgeshot are on patrol duty for Nomu *within* our borders, so they can’t go. Every other lower-ranked hero is busy or unsuitable for the job. It has to be me this time, kid. It’ll be fine, I promise you. It won’t take long—that’s exactly why I’m going.”

Izuku sours, glancing to the side and being unable to help his biting sarcasm. “What about Wash? Seems like his quirk would work *perfectly* in this situation.”

Yagi’s patience runs thin. “Young man, what are you so afraid of right now?”

Izuku’s hand aches when he looks at him. “I know you see it. It’s—it’s a trap. It’s gotta be. You—you’re being *lured.”* Hands tear through green and white curls. “It’s all too sudden, too convenient. You can’t tell me you don’t see how weird it is, sir. I mean, you’re supposed to be the face of the Nomu extinction team *here,* not in other countries. And, what, the Nomu are all made *specifically* so that no one but *you* can defeat them in some other nation thousands of miles away? *Come on…”*

“If it’s a trap, which it very well may be, that’s all the more reason for

me to go in the place of someone else. I can handle it," he says forcefully.

Izuku can't hear any of this anymore. He squeezes his numb arm, trying to get his blood flowing again. Is this All for One's plan? Is he using other countries with lower level pros to bait the Symbol of Peace into leaving Japan unprotected? Or is he simply trying to lure All Might to a place where he can be put down for good?

Izuku isn't sure which is worse.

"What about the United States?" He asks as a last resort. "They're always putting a foot in someone else's territory, so why aren't they helping now?"

"They've sent some aid in the form of supplies, but their heroes were never cleared to fly over."

"You see how fucking *weird* that is, right?"

"Mind your words," Yagi says defeatedly. "And of course I do, young man. But I don't exactly have much of a choice. There are civilian lives on the line—if I don't go, many more will die. As a hero, as a *holder* of our shared power, it is my duty to save."

"What about the civilians who will die here?"

Yagi's steel-blue eyes are dim, and it's the *look* on his face that makes Izuku realize just how selfish he sounded then. "This is unlike you, Midoriya."

"No, I'm—I'm just—" Izuku grits his teeth, nails digging into tingling flesh, longing to feel something, anything. "Forget it. You're right. You've done this kind of thing a lot of times before, so it's fine. It's, it's…"

"I don't want to go anymore than you want me to," All Might says, and he leans down to speak to him in a softer tone. "But I have to. And I'll be back before you even notice. You've been avoiding me for a few days now anyway, so this shouldn't be much of a stressor."

The last words aren't meant to be angry, but Izuku takes it that way. He is overtaken by the terrifying thought of All for One reaching the next stage in his plan, whatever that may be now. The reasonable course of action before attacking is to take All Might out of the equation, even if it's only temporary, so who's to say this *isn't* a trap?

And why is Yagi going despite *knowing* this?

Is he trying to get Izuku to tell him something more about his past so that he won't go? What could he even say?

Yagi, my father will surely kill me if you leave this country like he wants you to. Yagi, this quirk will die with me because I will not give it to him for anything, but please don't leave me yet because I don't want this to be over. Yagi, I don't mean to hate you. Yagi, it's just that my mother's trust issues have been leaking inside my chest like a faucet over the course of my entire life, so I really am sorry for not listening to you as much anymore. Yagi, I swear I would be a better successor if I could.

"But what if he comes back?" Izuku murmurs.

All Might's face tightens at the indirect mention of his fated rival, but he steps forward anyway to kneel in front of Izuku. "We are connected by something far greater than blood, you know. If there is trouble of that kind, I have faith I would know so immediately, and I would be there to help before anything happens."

"You don't believe that."

"I want to believe," Yagi sighs. "Because I have no choice."

"Wanting doesn't make it true."

The number one hero looks away, closing his tired eyes. When he stands, he's the one heading for the door this time. "I'll return in a few days. Please don't make trouble for your other teachers."

Izuku stares after him, lost in deja vu. He doesn't know why he was expecting a head pat or even a hug before the man left—when has he given the impression recently that he's wanted that from him?

And it's probably nothing, but the absence of contact between them feels like another lifetime of loneliness to Izuku.

"So, what's with you and blondie?"

Hizashi types away on his computer and acts as if he's not

eavesdropping, thankful that his colored glasses hide the direction of his eyesight.

Izuku jerks at the question, craning his neck to stare at Nemuri from his place on top of a filing cabinet. “Huh?”

“Oh, please, it’s so obvious that something happened. I could see the angsty glow of heartbreak written all over you two’s faces during class,” she says offhandedly, working through her flood of emails. “So what is it, kid? Bad romance? Petty arguments? Differences in morals? I’ve seen it all, don’t be shy.”

Izuku blushes deeply and rubs his neck. “Oh, Kacchan and I are fine, really. We just, uh, kinda argue a little sometimes. But you know we’re not actually, like, *together* or anything like—”

“Well, what were you arguing about? That’s the question I need to ask to know for sure if there’s anything going on between you two.”

Hizashi pauses in his work, eyes flicking over to see Izuku’s reaction. It’s definitely an uncomfortable and rather unprofessional question on Nemuri’s end, so Hizashi wants to make sure she’s not pushing too far —even though he would admittedly like to hear the answer to this as well. Izuku isn’t just his student anymore, so he contends he’s well within his right to know about this sort of stuff if the listener allows it… though probably not when they’re in a work or school environment.

Izuku rests the side of his head against the wall. “I don’t even know,” he says with a sigh, and *Jesus,* for a moment there he sounded just like Shouta during one of his and Hizashi’s *own* arguments.

“So it’s petty stuff?” Nemuri affirms, swirling in her chair to face the boy.

“Yeah.”

Long, acrylic nails tap on the desk. “Well, can’t say that’s surprising. Who started it?”

Izuku hesitates, his mood depleting exponentially. “I guess I did.”

“Huh. Well, I think what’s more important now is knowing how it ended and why—if ya figure that out, you’ll be able to move forward more easily.”

Hizashi feels a bout of awkwardness coming from Izuku then and intervenes before things can go further downhill. “Why don’t we talk about somethin’ else?” He says without looking at either of them, keeping his focus on his screen.

“Oh, shut it,” Nemuri says, waving his words away with a flourish of her hand. “I’m just trying to help the kid. Don’t act like you don’t do the same thing, Mic.”

Hizashi sticks out his tongue, flashing his piercing only briefly. “And don’t act like you’re not supposed to be in a meeting right now.”

The woman rolls her eyes and turns her back to him, continuing her conversation with Izuku. At this point, Hizashi can’t be too upset.

“Sometimes,” Izuku begins cautiously, as if treading on a field full of mines, “I think he doesn’t actually want to move forward with things, ya know?”

Nemuri is quiet for a moment before saying, flippantly, “Maybe that’s what he thinks about you.”

And then Hizashi is transported somewhere far away, back to a time when he was just barely eighteen and didn’t know how many years he’d be allowed to love freely for.

The memory of his graduation is fresh in his mind, pulling at the corners of his vision as he catches up to his best friend’s dark form. It’s nearly midnight, but Hizashi won’t give up like this.

“I’m still here, dammit!” He yells out. His voice cracks terribly as the words shoot out into the otherwise empty park. “Just like I’ve always been!”

Shouta, to his credit, pauses. His head is tucked down, hands stuffed inside his pockets. The first bits of winter make their way down from black clouds, clinging to his long black strands. The snow has always made Hizashi feel cozy and welcome somehow, but tonight is an exception.

He’s trembling without a jacket on, his skin prickling with goosebumps. His voice never works too well in the chill like this either.

Hizashi huffs, clutching his chest when it twinges painfully. “Where will you go now, huh?”

“I already told you,” Shouta says, voice carried to Hizashi by fresh snowflakes in the wind.

“So, what? You’ll just be a—a hired mercenary for the government for the rest of your life? Is that what we were training for?”

“It’s what I’m good at. Don’t act surprised when I’ve been working towards this for the past year, Mic.”

The words hurt. The nickname, usually so easy and soft when it rolls off of Shouta’s tongue, is biting. Why won’t you say my name? *Hizashi thinks to himself desperately.* Why can’t you look at me anymore?

“What about our agency!” Hizashi snaps, and the building snow makes way for him as he dares to take a step forward. “What about our goals? Our dream!”

Shouta turns then, but only halfway. His head lifts a little towards the sky, revealing red eyes always in need of drops, even more so in this cold. The white light of the lamppost above falls on his skin, casting shadows over his jaw, and God, he’s so irritatingly pretty here. To Hizashi, he’s always looked so perfect, but he could never say so aloud.

What he would give to be able to say it now without any retribution.

“What about it?” Shouta asks, uncaring and harsh, like he hasn’t thought about it for months when Hizashi knows in the very core of his being that his best friend has actually thought about it every day—just like he has. It’s not a dream anymore—more of a plague, a nightmare, but it’s something they share still. And that has to mean something, anything to Shouta, surely.

Hizashi can’t help but scoff, but it’s sad more than it is angry. “You’d leave us all behind?” He shakes his head. “You can’t tell me that’s what you really want. You still want to try! I know it. We can still do it, Shouta. We can still try.”

“Don’t you remember what our trying did to the other half of our agency?”

Hizashi’s lips part, his overgrown mohawk whipping around when the wind picks up. Oboro’s memory is held in a cracked vase in his mind with hastily wrapped tape all around it, keeping it together. And Shouta’s ignorance is the thing that unravels it all.

Our other half, he said, because Hizashi could never measure up equally to Oboro in Shouta’s eyes, could he? Even now, he doesn’t see Hizashi as being an equal part like he did Oboro. Even now, after they’ve both graduated and have become full pros with the opportunity to start something up, something of their very own, something to call theirs—

Shouta is still slightly turned away from him, eyes focused somewhere in the distance. Not looking at him, not seeing him.

Hizashi clenches his fists. He shivers, the iciness of the falling snow clashing with the newfound heat of his skin. Why won't you see me? *He wants to shout again, because it's true that Shouta loved Oboro first, but Hizashi has loved Shouta forever.*

Hizashi and Oboro were friends before meeting Shouta, sure, but that never mattered too much to Hizashi, because to him it always felt like he's known Shouta since the very beginning.

"Move on!" Hizashi shouts, throat burning from the ache of using his quirk. Shouta's hair lifts up as he erases it for him, surely by instinct now. "Dammit, Shouta, please. Move on!"

He takes another step with a burning passion within him now, foot sinking into the snow.

"I miss him, alright? Just as much as you do! I—I know it hurts, God, I know! But we—we've still got each other, Sho. And Nem, and Sensei, and our classmates, and our parents!" Each breath is a puff of white. "You can keep leanin' on me, Shouta. I'm not going anywhere. I promise you. I'm not leaving. So stop pushin' me away!"

Shouta is deathly silent. He crosses the distance between them, stopping when Hizashi can feel his warmth just standing there before him. Slowly, and with great care, Shouta takes off his red scarf, pulling it out from beneath his capture weapon, and presses it against Hizashi's chest. "You're the one who won't move on," he says simply but with an underlying intensity that has Hizashi staring with shining emerald eyes. "Our dream is dead, Mic. We have no agency. And we never will."

He steps back and sighs a little, something like regret ghosting his features —features that Hizashi has recreated with charcoal and an empty canvas in the late hours of the night many, many times over.

"I'm sorry," Shouta finishes, "but that's just not the sort of thing that's meant for us."

"But it could be," Hizashi whispers, teeth gritted now. "We could make it if we wanted it badly enough, and you know it."

"Good night, Hizashi."

The memory is poison to Hizashi, and he has to shake himself to get

back to his work.

Their relationship is much better now, thankfully, as they found each other again a couple of years later and were able to build things back up, slowly but surely. Shouta matured, and so did Hizash, and they soon found a balance, as rickety as the bridge is, and it's worked for nearly a decade now. But that sort of thing is rare in these circumstances, Hizashi knows.

He hates to think that Izuku and Bakugou might not be able to find that reconnection like he and Shouta did. He swallows hard and turns to look at Izuku, about to give some abrupt, wise advice that would make his parents proud—only to find that the boy is gone and Nemuri is packing up her things for the day.

Hizashi sighs to himself and continues his work, deciding to bring the topic back up at a later time.

Kacchan doesn't touch him after their fight.

When walking past each other in the crowded halls, Kacchan will move to the side to avoid brushing shoulders with Izuku. He won't outright tell him to go away, but when Izuku finds himself beside him on the way to lunch, Kacchan will abruptly turn away—even at the slightest touch of Izuku's fingers against his hand.

And during class, when Kacchan passes a stack of papers behind him to Izuku, he won't wait for Izuku to grab them. He drops them unceremoniously onto his desk, and sometimes Izuku has to rush to grab them so they won't flutter right off the surface of it.

But worst of all, Kacchan is quiet when Izuku is around.

Izuku, as weird as it is, wants the irritation and the anger and the rolling of Kacchan's eyes if only that meant he would fucking *look* at him or speak to him. But Kacchan does neither of those things anymore.

He won't speak to Izuku, and he won't text him. One night, Izuku has his shaking thumb hovering over the *send* button on his phone as he reads over the message he wants to send to his best friend. He's been

mulling over it for an hour now, and it's not even that long: *can we talk after school? i can come over*

But he doesn't end up sending it, as his nerves are way too high. So, he backspaces it all.

hey, im sorry for how i acted. sensei said we could go out to eat after school to talk if you're up for it.

He needs to add something to make it sound more personal: *I want to talk*

That's even worse, though, he feels.

hey, we need to talk

That's too demanding.

want to talk?

Now it just sounds like Izuku doesn't care about it.

I'm sorry I yelled. Can I call?

Izuku scraps it and shoves his face into a pillow, giving up on it entirely. Kacchan would talk to him if he wanted to, so he shouldn't force it. He would just make him even more mad. He debates going to Shouta or Hizashi for help, but he pushes that idea away just as quickly as it came.

For now, he suffers through the silence and the absence of Kacchan's touch against his skin, and he hopes he'll have more courage tomorrow.

Izuku holds eye contact for four and a half seconds at a time. Then he has to look away, head tipping to the side to show he's still listening but also thinking now.

It's the average time he's deduced is the normal for most people. Staring for any shorter makes him look flighty or guilty, and staring for longer makes him creepy. So, when Hound Dog speaks, Izuku listens. He maintains eye contact for the appropriate time and will

glance away for a previously decided amount of seconds using a rotational method—two seconds, five seconds, two seconds, three seconds, four seconds, and back to the first iteration. That's how long he looks away for.

It's practiced yet *just* sporadic enough to make it look *not* robotic. Izuku wonders if Hound Dog can tell, though. He thinks he'd say so if he did, as the counselor has been very vocal about those kinds of observations recently.

He's been given homework by Hound Dog in the past week or so. Every time he thinks of something that makes him feel upset in the middle of feeling alright, he has to write it down somewhere and bring it to his next session to discuss it.

When he first pitched the idea to Izuku, the boy kind of laughed and said they'd never be able to get through it all in one session—mostly because not even Izuku knows why he suddenly feels down sometimes.

Hound Dog didn't think that was funny, though.

When it's around time for Izuku to present a topic from his homework, he breathes in deep like Hound Dog suggested and holds the cat plushie sitting on the cushion next to him. "I used to have more quirks than I do now," he says simply.

"What happened to them?" Hound Dog asks.

"He took them away."

"Why is that?"

Izuku thinks for a moment. There's a lot of different reasons why, but he'll settle for the one that's the most common. "I used to try to hurt him with them."

Hound Dog's whiskers twitch in what Izuku has come to realize is concentration. "Can you describe one of those times to me?"

Well. Izuku shifts uncomfortably. This is probably the fourth real session he's had with Hound Dog. The past couple of weeks have been going slowly, as if in a haze. Izuku is still grounded due to the Nezu incident and the cannabis, so he has no excuse to not attend the scheduled sessions. One good thing about them, maybe, is that he's not scared of talking about certain things anymore. He's seen

Tsukauchi twice since that first time in the nurse's room, too.

All around, none of this feels… solid.

“I was never strong enough to physically hurt him,” Izuku explains. “So, when I was angry enough, I just…” The four seconds on the rotation turn to ten before he knows it. “I hurt myself instead.”

Hound Dog’s expression doesn’t change. His emotions are slightly cold but bubbly, like the end of a waterfall. “And you did this because you thought he would care then?”

Izuku nods. “I mean, if I hurt myself badly enough, I wouldn’t be able to train or do what he wanted me to, so it would put me out of commission for a bit.”

“And did you think that’s the only reason he would care?”

Izuku is quiet again. “Sometimes I used to think he didn’t want to see me hurt. But then he’d do something to me and… I guess we’d be back to square one.”

“I see.” His eyes grow a little more narrow when his brows furrow. He’s not writing anything down right now, probably because he knows it distracts Izuku greatly. “Would you be able to tell me how you hurt yourself?”

Two seconds pass, and Izuku hasn’t looked at him yet. “It’s like I told you. I used those quirks.”

“Would you like to change our topic?” Hound Dog checks suddenly.

“I think it’s okay for now,” Izuku says, as he knows why Hound Dog asked that. His next question is likely going to be about wanting to know a specific instance—he’s asked for details a lot of times now. So, Izuku doesn’t give him the chance to even say it aloud. He just wants this out of his system because he feels that if he doesn’t say it now, he may never be able to admit it to someone else again. “I had a quirk when I was ten that I don’t have now. I called it Leveling. Did you see it in my notebook?”

“I haven’t read your notebook, pup.”

This makes warmth settle over Izuku even though he isn’t sure how much he believes that. He plays with the plushie in his hands and taps his foot. “It allowed me to increase gravity on myself. To the point

where I would be pressed against the ground—or any surface I was on. It was pretty strong. I could never learn how to break away."

"Sounds useful," Hound Dog notes.

"It was. That's why he gave it to me. It was a way to ensure someone with a zero-gravity quirk wouldn't be able to put me off balance, y'know? He was always thinking ahead." Izuku breathes in once and lets it out slowly. "My father was gone for the week. So was Kurogiri. Um, like, a year before, I had taken a pill from the doctor he was acquainted with. I thought it would come in handy eventually, and it did that day, I think."

"What did the pill do?"

"It forced your quirk to activate at high levels for several minutes. Sort of like Force, but, well, with it lasting longer."

"That can be dangerous."

"I know."

"And that's why you thought it would be handy?"

"It's how I wanted to hurt him."

Hound Dog leans back a little bit in his chair. It creaks a little, making his ear flick. Izuku waits until the rotation has reset itself before continuing on.

"When I was sure they wouldn't be back, I… went into the lab the doctor rarely used anymore. Filled up the tank he would put me in sometimes, and I laid in it. I let the fluids fill up over my head." Izuku stares into the beady eyes of the toy cat, remembering the day as clearly as if it just happened. And with the way his dreams have been going, maybe it did. "I took the pill then. And I regretted it."

The liquid in the tank was cold at first. A bone chilling kind of cold that had Izuku spasming, and not just because of the way his quirks were forced to activate. But then it turned hot, and it was so blue that for a moment it looked like the dark sky to Izuku. He was mashed against the bottom of the glass, air leaving him as the heat boiled him from the inside out. He couldn't even lift his hands or feet to kick himself free.

He was stuck to the bottom like glue, staring up into nothingness. As

the bubbles raced each other to the surface, his mind was flooded with thoughts of his mother and Kacchan.

Hound Dog is studying him now, not an ounce of judgment in his voice. “How did you break away?” He asks softly.

“I didn’t. Tomura found me. He wasn’t strong enough to pull me up either, so he had to turn the glass to ash to get rid of all the fluids.”

“And how did he react?”

This is the question that trips Izuku up. He chews on his bottom lip, eyes flitting back and forth from Hound Dog’s fuzzy face. “Oh, he was *angry* . Angrier than I’d ever seen him. He had to beat me to get some of the fluids out of my lungs. I don’t really know what he was saying, as I was still out of it, but he was yelling at me. And he told Father when he got back.” Izuku lets out a small breath. “And that’s when he took the quirk away from me and put me back in that room.”

Hound Dog nods and writes a note down on his paper. Izuku watches him write, wanting to ask what exactly he’s writing down but knowing he likely wouldn’t get a good response.

“Why did you choose that method?” The counselor asks, back to looking at him. “You say you wanted to hurt him, but I feel that there would be less… dire ways of doing that.”

I wanted it to hurt me, too, he thinks, but doesn’t say. He lifts a shoulder. “I… I feel them all over me. The past users of the quirks I have. I feel them on me, in me, just—just under my skin. I’m used to it now, but when I was younger it felt worse. And I would scrub and scrub and scrub in the shower. I’d try to dig out that feeling. The… the dirtiness.” Another half-hearted shrug. “But it never went away. I always felt unclean. So, I thought that if I tried to drown myself, it would tell him just how much I hated it. How much I despised him for doing everything he did. And, at the same time, it would cleanse my body.”

“So you could die clean?”

Izuku nods. “I guess.”

“Our first session, you told me you’ve never tried to kill yourself. Do you not consider this an attempt?” He asks carefully.

“No,” Izuku says honestly. “I didn’t feel like myself back then. I

think… that that was the worst I've ever felt. So, no, it wasn't really me I was trying to kill, if that makes sense. I just wanted to piss him off and hurt him, like I said. I don't think I really did it to—to escape or anything. If I wanted that, I could've just snapped my own neck or thrown myself back into the basement with the Nomu, right?" He looks to the floor. "Sometimes I wonder why I never did."

Hound Dog rumbles. "Perhaps there was something you wanted before you left."

Maybe there was.

"Would you ever do something like that again?" Hound Dog asks, and Izuku isn't surprised. He has to ask these questions.

"No."

"If you had the chance to redo it, would you still take that pill?"

Knowing that it would just strain things between my crumbling family even more? Izuku shakes his head.

"What about if you found yourself in a similar situation today?"

"I have One for All, and I haven't kept my promise to my mother, so I can't leave."

"Those are good reasons," Hound Dog appeases. "But, right now, let's try to think of all the other things you want to do—things unrelated to your family or quirks. Places you want to visit, things you want to achieve or have, things you'd like to say. How about that?"

"I'm not going to kill myself."

Hound Dog only flashes him a small smile at his bitter tone. "It's still beneficial to always have a list of things to work towards, even *after* you've made good on your promises."

In the short silence that follows, he thinks of Kacchan again, of his hand jerking away from him in the halls, and of the emptiness that stretches between them during class.

And Izuku agrees with Hound Dog, because maybe he needs this.

At midnight on the day Izuku's grounding is up, the boy finds himself in the doorway of Shouta and Hizashi's office at the apartment.

Hizashi is asleep, but Shouta is awake working overtime, catching up on cases given to him by his agency. There's a singular yellow light in the corner of the room, outlining Shouta's hunched over frame. The boy stares at him for a few seconds, building up his nerves, before walking inside.

"Sensei?"

Shouta doesn't look at him yet. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"Because it's Saturday now."

"What does that have to—" Shouta pauses, head lifting to the calendar on the wall. The realization dawns on him a moment later, as he glances back at Izuku with an eyebrow raised. "You think I'm going to let you patrol tonight now that you're not grounded?"

"I mean, I was hoping so."

"Where's that apology essay I assigned you?"

Izuku takes out his folded up stack of papers, smoothing out the wrinkles before handing it over for Shouta to quickly scan. "Single spaced, eleven point font, and eighteen pages, not including the cover or works cited."

Shouta nods appreciatively. "If I were to grade this how I normally do for classwork, what do you think I'd give you?"

Izuku mulls over this, shifting on his feet. "Ninety-eight."

"Why?"

"The structure could be a little better."

Tipping his head and leaning back, Shouta hands the essay to him. "So, make it a one hundred."

Taking a red pen off the desk, Izuku brings Hizashi's chair up to the side of Shouta's desk and quickly gets to work, face set in a small scowl. It's a good thing he only recently finished this essay. All of the evidence he used and the details he included are fresh in his mind

now, which allows him to easily circle quotes and some of his arguments and move them to where he thinks would be a more appropriate location.

Knowing where to place evidence in an essay is key to making your case look strong.

After a few minutes, Izuku is finished. He sets the pen down and waits impatiently for Shouta to look up at him from his work.

“One hundred,” he affirms, knee bouncing up and down.

“You better hope it is,” Shouta warns before sliding the essay under the stack of papers he’s currently looking at. “For now, you better head out, because I’m only giving you until three o’clock. If your ass isn’t inside this house and in bed by then, you can kiss Rabbit goodbye for the unforeseeable future, understood?”

Izuku, unperturbed by the threat, jolts to his feet and quickly pushes Hizashi’s chair back where it belongs. “Yes, sir! Thank you!” He bows quickly, hoping Shouta can feel his gratitude. “My panic button is on, too! I won’t turn it off.”

“I know you won’t. And don’t forget to *text me every hour so I know you’re—”*

Izuku is already out of the door, rushing to put his costume on and slinging his supplies over his shoulder. If he has less than three hours to get his important things done, he can’t waste a second. First he’s going to patrol in the far corner of the city since the crime rate has spiked there in the past week, and then he’s going to head for the Club. He has managerial business to take care of that he can’t do over the phone.

He can’t say he didn’t expect this. He knew that taking on the role as head of the Club in this prefecture would be hard, but to be fair he also didn’t expect shit to hit the fan so badly in his personal life at around the same time as his promotion. He feels bad that he’s been slacking, but Kaida told him that he’s already done way more for the Club and its members in the short few weeks he’s been the head than any other past head has in their entire tenure.

So maybe Izuku is just being a little harsh on himself.

Regardless, it does feel weird when he walks quickly inside the new location and heads for the office area. The few members who notice

him smile grimly and put reassuring hands on his shoulders as he passes, while others only stare and nod in his direction. There's a sense of camaraderie in the Club, for sure, and Izuku is only reminded of this even more now.

While many don't support the Board's decision of naming *him* the head, as he's far too young and, compared to some others, inexperienced, Izuku knows a large majority of the Club would still lay down their life for him without hesitation if he asked.

Not that he would ever want them to, of course, but the point remains.

He's not used to so much profound *respect* radiating off of his club mates, but he finds he isn't too uncomfortable because of it.

After meeting with some representatives from other districts and forming a more united effort into planning a defense force against the Nomu and other rising villains, Izuku decides to head to one last place.

If he wants to be able to launch a more offensive investigation into the Yakuza regarding their continued use of a young girl in making unidentified drugs, Izuku needs the support of the Commission. They undoubtedly have the most supplies, the most resources, and the most public control when it comes to other heroes.

Izuku can admit he's strong, but he's also not dumb enough to think he'd be able to take on the fucking *Yakuza* by himself. Besides, doing that would wage war against *all* of the Club, so he needs to make sure that this won't be seen as just a Club effort.

He needs pro heroes to aid him, and he needs to form a team. Doing so is much harder than it sounds, though. This is why Izuku needs the Commission— *they* can lend Izuku those supplies, as in, heroes, in return for him accepting their proposal.

There's only one issue, however. Izuku still needs one well-known and well-respected hero to sign for him on the contract. And with All Might *still* out of the country, it can't be him—though Izuku wouldn't have wanted to ask that of him anyway after everything that's recently come to light about Izuku.

And Izuku only knows one other pro who would have around the same sway in the public.

The Todoroki household is probably one of the safest estates Izuku has ever broken into.

There are, in total, one hundred and seventy four security cameras, each equipped with motion-sensors, infrared vision, night vision, and thermal vision. Along with those, there are around three hundred areas of motion-activated alarms—some silent and some not. Bright lights also come on and put you on the spot if even the *slightest* noise is detected.

Hell, even an Endeavor *patrol* walks the perimeter of the estate *and* the surrounding neighborhood all day and night.

Izuku won't lie—he's thoroughly impressed. It's all to protect his family, Izuku is sure. Though it's ironic, considering everything he's done in the past.

He knew Endeavor's house would be well-protected, but he did admittedly underestimate just *how* safe it would be. So, his plans are set back by twenty minutes, as he struggles a little to gain access to the private server the security cameras use. It also annoys him that a lot of the cameras are wired and monitored from a *physical* place on the grounds, so he isn't able to mess up the feeds from his phone. He's forced to shoot sticky, energized arrows onto them to force them to short circuit and turn off.

This also means he has to force the people *monitoring* the cameras to fall asleep with his homemade Midnight-themed bombs.

And so, it takes him a while to actually make his way all the way inside undetected.

He has less time to prepare for Endeavor's arrival now, but he'll have to deal with it. Endeavor's shift tonight ends at one-fifty, and he normally makes it home within ten minutes depending on if he uses his quirk or stops for late dinner.

Tonight, though, Izuku is certain he'll make his way home immediately afterwards.

He stands in the shadows of the large living room, leaning against the wall at such an angle that not even the wind from the air conditioner could blow weirdly past him and give away his position. There is only one person home at this time, and that's Todoroki. His older brother and sister are gone for the night, with Todoroki Natsuo at his college dorms and Todoroki Fuyumi staying at her friend's apartment.

Izuku made sure he was careful. He's been watching them via drones and his clients at the Club for two weeks now, which is just long enough to know their patterns.

And also long enough to know what time Todoroki Enji returns from his late night patrols. So, when Izuku still doesn't feel Endeavor getting close to his house, he begins to get confused. There are a few probable reasons for the delay, all of which—

The locks click, and the heavy door opens from the outside.

Izuku's eyebrows fly to his hairline once he recognizes Endeavor's large form. He still can't feel him, but that is undoubtedly him, so what's going on? Why can't Izuku sense his powerful quirk like he usually can?

There are three likely options: one being that this is actually a clone, two that Endeavor is somehow quirkless now—which wouldn't make sense since Izuku would still be able to sense him somewhat in that case, and three being that Extract is just being weird.

Izuku isn't given time to think through each hypothesis, however, because Endeavor pauses when he walks in and places his boots by the door. He's still crouched low to the ground, his large hand not yet having removed itself from the top of his shoe.

The number two hero just stands there, listening. And that's how Izuku knows he's been caught.

To be fair, he was never banking on being able to stay hidden for long anyway.

So, biting the bullet, Izuku takes a step forward, still in the shadows, but his foot hasn't even touched the ground yet when the flames erupt. A fireball shoots toward him, but Deflect wraps around him before the scorching heat can engulf him whole. The attack is redirected to his right, where it dissipates into the air.

The next fireball barrels his way a quarter of a second later, this one being much denser. If Izuku uses Deflect for this, it'll just hit the lovely dining table off to the side and ruin it—yeah, it's mahogany, so Izuku isn't about to do that.

Instead, Black Whip creates reinforced gloves around his hands and torso and allows him to *catch* the densely packed fireball. With his back now pressed against the wall due to the sheer force and speed of

the impact, Izuku is able to kick off and send the fireball right back at Endeavor.

The man easily absorbs it in a blur of red and orange, and Izuku resolutely doesn't move even though he does sense the next attack coming. Endeavor's large hand is wrapped around his throat in a second's time, yanking him into the light now flooding from the lamp at the entrance to the home. Izuku dangles from his grip, hands gripping his meaty wrist to alleviate the pressure, and he can only smile when he sees the way Endeavor's face drops.

"You," he says, sounding around seventeen steps *above* being pissed. And maybe he has a right to be this upset, as Izuku did just break into his home. "What the *hell* are you doing inside my house, Rabbit?"

"Would you believe it if I said this isn't the first time someone has asked me that in that same tone?"

"Oh, believe me," Endeavor grinds out, grip tightening on him, "after I'm through with you, this'll be the very last time."

"You think so?" Izuku asks breathlessly, now scrabbling against his arm. Fuck, the man could stand to loosen his hold just a little.

Endeavor keeps Izuku dangling in the air and uses his free hand to yank off the weapons hanging from Izuku's middle, including the ones stashed in his jacket. His knives and accessories clatter to the floor, and Endeavor kicks them away. "You better wise up right now," he threatens then, his blue eyes piercing into Izuku's, "because I'll only ask this once: *where is my son?"*

Izuku fights back a roll of the eye, wincing when he responds through labored breaths. "He's—he's still in his— *ah*— room. He doesn't even know I'm here, but if you keep— *shit*— shouting like that, he just might." He adds rather desperately, "I would n—never hurt him, sir."

For a minute it looks like Endeavor doesn't believe him and will go check for himself, but Izuku sees the way his jaw clenches, a clear indicator that he's thinking hard about something.

Izuku would like to bet he's remembering Hosu. *Yeah,* he wants to spit, *why the fuck would I waste my time trying to hurt your son when I fought alongside him to kill Stain, you idiot? Think for one second.*

The grip on Izuku's throat lessens a little, allowing him to breathe again. The boy gasps a little, blinking a few times when the feeling in

his limbs return. “Thanks.”

Endeavor’s eye twitches, a sudden sense of calmness exuding from his body. “You can sense where people are, can’t you?”

Izuku stays silent.

“I’ve been studying you,” the pro hero continues, his gaze not breaking away from him. The abrupt change in tone gives Izuku whiplash. “You’re always one step ahead. You can always tell when some villain is coming up on you, and you always know where they’re running to.”

“Some say I have a pair of two functioning eyes,” Izuku says, but surprisingly Endeavor ignores the jab.

“It took me a while to figure out how you do it. I watched a lot of videos, spent more nights than I wanted analyzing your every appearance, your every public fight.”

Slowly, Endeavor reaches up and peels a small, sheer slip of bandage from behind his ear. He holds it up to the light, eyes dark, and Izuku’s lips part in awe.

It’s a miniature device, near invisible to the naked eye, with an even tinier blinking dot on the side of it. Now that the bandage is off of Endeavor’s skin, Izuku is hit with the feeling of his overwhelming, ferocious quirk.

And it’s too good to be just a coincidence.

“Quirk energy blockers,” Izuku whispers.

“After some more research, I figured it was the quirk you could track. So, I had someone make this for me to try my theory out.” He lowers Izuku to the ground just enough for the tips of his toes to touch the tile. “And it looks like I was correct.”

Izuku feels like a deer in headlights for a few seconds, but when Endeavor doesn’t say anything else, obviously waiting for his response, Izuku knows the man doesn’t have anything else to link this information to.

So, he may as well help him connect the dots.

“Well,” he chokes out, pushing away every ounce of his pride while

knowing his thirteen year old self would hate him for doing this. “I’m glad you’re so smart, because I need your help.”

Endeavor sneers. “And why would I trust you enough to do anything for you?”

Izuku’s hand shakily comes up, his fingerprints pressing against the side of his mask. They register successfully, and the accents light up green. As Endeavor watches with an increasingly confused expression, Izuku takes off his mask and lets his hand fall back to the pro hero’s wrist.

Air hits his dirt encrusted face, and his curls stick to his forehead and cheeks. Endeavor’s eyes widen, and Izuku sees the exact moment everything falls into place in his mind.

“Because All Might does.”

Chapter End Notes

> never thought I’d be drawing parallels between erasermic and bakudeku yet here we are. also. around five years ago i was in love with my best friend and used to hate myself for being a girl bc I thought I’d actually have a chance at being with her if I was a boy instead. so now i like to think that mic felt the same way about himself before he knew aizawa was gay lmao. oh the young gay experience 🫣
>
> leaving tonight — the neighborhood
>
> inui isn’t afraid of izuku killing himself right now. but he is afraid that after izuku does what he says he will, izuku will lose his reason to keep fighting and will let himself die. that’s why inui is attempting to get izuku to see that he has more reasons to live beyond what he can do for others
>
> r

the back porch

Chapter Notes

sry this took a little bit. chap 89 will be posted soon, as i wrote 88 and 89 at the same time and both r done :)

it is now december, which means you all have to be nice to each other. some of the characters in this chap could use this advice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shouto is awake the moment his father arrives at the house.

It is the worst part of the day, when Endeavor comes back from his late patrols or meetings to sleep for a mere three hours at a time in his large, empty bedroom. Sometimes he doesn't even get that much rest. Sometimes he comes and spends the rest of his night in his study.

He is hardworking, sure, but Shouto wishes more than anything that the man would just leave him and the house behind forever, along with his siblings.

It's not like his father wouldn't be able to afford a hotel room each night. The only reason Shouto doesn't do that himself is because he's been banned from using Endeavor's name and money on the billing, rendering him stuck at home.

Which isn't usually so bad when his siblings are with him. But tonight is different.

When the entire estate trembles like an earthquake is on the way, Shouto isn't alarmed. On some occasions, his bastard father throws tantrums once he arrives home and blasts his fire all over the place. It isn't a new concept.

But when the second blast comes and he can actually hear his father's angry yell on the other side of the estate, Shouto forces himself to his feet, heart banging against his ribcage as he quickly slides on his slippers and makes for the front entrance to the house.

One tantrum is normal, but two? And back to back?

A thought burns in his mind: is Natsuo home? He's supposed to be at his dorms, but what if he came back early for some reason? He and

their father fight sometimes, and on occasion it can turn somewhat violent, especially since Natsuo is just as fiery as Endeavor is in all ways but physical—so what if this is another fight, this time with Father reaching his breaking point?

Terror grips his chest, so cold and sharp and blinding that Shouto stumbles on his way there. This is one of the only times where he curses how large their house is.

Ice is already forming on his right side, making his heavy breathing come out white. His head spins, and for a moment he is back in his childhood where love existed when he didn't.

When he rounds the corner, Shouto doesn't see Natsuo, but he does see someone else.

A different kind of panic overtakes him then—this one raw and hot, *scorching* even. Shouto's mouth drops open, the air in the room feeling as though it's charged with electricity.

His father has Midoriya, who is fully dressed in his Rabbit attire besides his face mask, by the throat, holding him just barely above the floor. His flames are on, and Shouto feels the heat from where he's standing some fifteen feet away. He knows from experience just how hot it must feel to Midoriya right now.

Upon Shouto's arrival, Endeavor's head snaps towards him, fear crossing over his expression. "Shouto!" He snaps. "Get back!"

On instinct, Shouto almost obeys, but then Midoriya twists his neck to look at him and smiles a little, eyes twinkling, and Shouto doesn't move.

"Sorry to wake you," Midoriya manages to get out over the sound of the roaring flames, and Shouto only panics more, because his classmate is unmasked in the hands of his father, the number two pro hero, and is definitely about to be arrested right now, or worse. *Much* worse.

"I said go!" His father shouts, his tone commanding.

Midoriya grunts, irritated. "I said I'm not gonna hurt him, you ass—" He cuts off with a choke when Endeavor tightens his grip, and Shouto lurches forward.

His right hand clenches, and he can barely think or rationalize his

next actions when they happen. Ice shoots out from his foot, covering the ground beneath him and nearing his father and Midoriya. The icy spikes melt before they can reach Endeavor, but it's enough to make the pro hero stumble back, on the defensive against his son now.

Endeavor's flames reach even higher with his added irritation. "Shouto, *go!"*

"No!" Shouto yells. He takes another step to make up for the yard Endeavor added between them, and he feels the hairs on his arms raise when frost begins to form over his skin. "Put him down!"

At this, his father's eyes go round as saucers. The fire making up his beard dies, allowing Shouto to more clearly see his expression. "You already knew about this?" he asks his son, and though his voice is harsh, his surprise outweighs the anger.

Shouto is confused about what he's yapping about until he remembers the fact that Midoriya *is* unmasked right here. Endeavor was probably expecting some sort of reaction from Shouto upon seeing this—as it should be for the first time.

Yet here Shouto is, racing in gallantly without a moment's hesitation to defend his vigilante classmate.

Midoriya places a boot on Endeavor's flaming chest as if to alleviate the pressure, but otherwise he makes no move to escape his grasp. "No!" He gasps out, shaking his head as much as he can. "He didn't know—!"

"Shut it!" Endeavor spits, shaking him like a can.

This infuriates Shouto even more. He shoves his way right in between his father and Midoriya's dangling body, the ice on his cheek and arm melting immediately once scorching heat hits him. He uses one of his hands to shove against Endeavor's abdomen while the other reaches behind his back to rest on Midoriya's middle. "So *what* if I did?" He snarls, and suddenly the heat in the room is coming from himself, not Endeavor. His hair whips around when the smallest flame appears from the corner of his eye, lighting up his features and allowing him to see it clearly when Endeavor's realization hits.

"Shouto," Midoriya whispers, and his breath on Shouto's neck is a cold contrast to the heat enveloping his body. But it's the use of his first name that makes Shouto pause. No one besides his family has ever called him Shouto; he's never gotten close enough with anyone

before for them to move onto first name basis.

Hearing it come from Midoriya for the first time does weird things to Shouto, especially in this circumstance.

Endeavor is towering over Shouto, face set with rage. Because he's still holding Izuku up, his large arm hovers above Shouto's head, though he's unbothered by the newfound heat of his son's left side.

While Shouto has been using his fire more and more ever since the Sports Festival, it's still something his father is surprised by when he witnesses it in person.

Endeavor scoffs, eye twitching considerably as he seems to come to some conclusion in his mind. He drops Midoriya to the floor, burly arms crossing over his large chest as he watches Shouto scramble to help Midoriya catch his breath.

"One wrong move," Endeavor threatens the vigilante, tone firm yet smooth, "and believe me when I say you'll be *begging* for a prison cell by the time I'm done. Child or not, I don't care." He jabs a thumb towards the dining table. "Sit. You too, Shouto. Now."

"Don't order us around!" Shouto finds himself saying, his hand wrapped around his friend's upper arm. Midoriya rubs his neck and only gives Shouto another toothy, exhausted grin when the boy asks if he's alright.

Something flashes across Midoriya's dirty face, but Shouto doesn't have time to process it before the boy is leaning forward, one arm wrapping around Shouto's back in a hug. It's loose, and it's weird, but it *should* be a hug, technically. Shouto doesn't get many of those, but he assumes that's what this is. It is a hug the same way the one they shared after fighting Stain was, right?

"I'm sorry to bring you into this," Midoriya whispers in his ear. "I know you were sleeping."

Shouto jerks his head to the side. "Don't apologize," he says fiercely, and at the same time Endeavor shoves the two of them apart and barks out: *Table!*

He's just about to retort something back when Midoriya limps past him and obediently sits at the dining room table. Shouto stares after him, surprised, before following right behind.

He wants to ask what's happening, and how Midoriya ended up here of all places, but he knows he can't ask that right now. That's something they'll have to discuss later in private.

When both boys are sitting, with Shouto looking more fired up than even Endeavor is, the flame hero stands before them and fixes Shouto with a glare. "How long have you known his identity?"

"Not long, so you can't be upset," Midoriya answers for him immediately, and Shouto can feel his slight fear in the air. "It was after Hosu."

Endeavor lets out a long-suffering sigh, and when he wipes a hand down his face, he looks a lot less like the number two pro hero and more like a tired old man. "And you didn't tell me, *why?"* He scowls. "You know what, forget it. I'll speak with you later." His focus turns completely to Midoriya. "How long has All Might known?"

Midoriya's eyes narrow, and he doesn't say a word.

Endeavor's flames rise high, his beard reigniting. "Answer me or I'll make good on the promise I made a minute ago."

Shouto bristles, but Midoriya answers before he can: "Long enough to know I wouldn't hurt anyone innocent."

"A month, or has it been even less?" Endeavor demands.

"Something like that." Midoriya begins to rub his arm vigorously—Shouto knows that's the arm that goes numb sometimes. "What," the boy continues, "you really think All Might could be my teacher and not find out? I'm glad you think I'm that good at lying, but I'm not."

Shouto can't help but stare at Midoriya for a moment. Ever since Hosu, things have been difficult. Shouto has trouble sleeping, as he can't help but see a dead hero's face and a large monster's claws nearing him every time he closes his eyes. He hears large cracks sometimes during class and has to sit there for a moment to clear his mind so he won't be transported somewhere far away.

And what's worse? His mother has consumed every waking moment of his days. When he's not studying or training or avoiding his bastard father, for that matter, he's visiting his mother. He's writing letters and attempting to see her face-to-face. It's hard, sure, of course it is.

But he manages.

When he's doing none of those things, though, he's thinking of his friends. And on rare nights, the good nights, he's dreaming of Midoriya.

He sees curly green hair flying in the wind, colorful shards in emerald eyes that are focused on him and only him despite being in a room full of other people, better people—Shouto sees a small smile, hears a soft laugh, and feels the way Midoriya's calloused hand brushes against his shoulder.

He senses Midoriya even when he is not with him. It is an odd feeling to be haunted by someone who is alive and unaware.

"Does he know you're here?" Endeavor asks next, and he sounds more concerned than anything now. Shouto notes the way the man sways on his feet, and his eyes narrow.

Midoriya matches his expression. "He's out of town."

"That means no." Endeavor gives a dry snort, almost amused, and grabs his phone from his back pocket. He turns on the light to the large dining room, and in the blink of an eye, the phone is yanked out of his hand with a quick jolt of Midoriya's hand.

"Don't tell him," Midoriya warns, "not when you don't even know what I'm going to ask you."

Endeavor stalks forward to snatch it, crossing the space between them in two heavy strides, but Midoriya tosses it back to him before the hero can get too close. Endeavor catches it, his expression one that clearly says *yeah, that's what I thought.*

Surprisingly, his father just puts the phone back in his pocket and tilts his head to fix the two boys with an even glare. "Do you know what could happen to the both of you right now?"

Shouto rolls his eyes. "If you were going to do anything to us, you would've already."

Endeavor's blue eyes flash, and he jabs a finger in his son's face. It takes all of Shouto's willpower not to slap it away. "Keep acting so disrespectful and I'll change my plans," he snaps, "or, better yet, I'll make you watch while I take your little felon classmate here to *Tartarus."*

"Not even *you* would be stupid enough to do something so ignorant,

you—”

Midoriya cuts in, exhausted, “I don’t have a lot of time to spare right now, and neither do you, Endeavor. I don’t need to be told about the consequences of whatever you think it is I’ve done. I already know.”

“It’s not about what you have done in the past,” Endeavor corrects icily. “Believe me, I couldn’t care less about that now. It’s what you might do in the future that I care about, especially since Shouto is involved.”

Shouto doesn’t have anything to say about that, because what is his father talking about? Is he implying something? And why did his voice drop even lower when he mentioned that last part?

This sparks a better question in his mind: what is Midoriya’s purpose in all this? It’s clear to Shouto now that this wasn’t an accident—his friend is way too calm for it to have been one. He was caught by Endeavor on his own volition. This was planned.

“That’s exactly why I’m here,” Midoriya states, and his eyes flick nervously for a moment over to Shouto before going back. “If I want to do my jobs efficiently, I need your support. And if you want to protect everyone, you’ll realize you need my help just as much as I need yours.”

“I don’t need anything from you. And I don’t care what All Might thinks—I don’t trust you one bit. Get support from some other hero, because you won’t find it with me.”

“You don’t have much of a choice.”

Shouto’s brows draw together. *You came into this house, knowing the dangers, just to get his attention and ask him for his help? What could my father give that All Might or another top ranking pro couldn’t?*

This must be really serious, though, whatever it is. Serious enough for Midoriya to risk himself like this.

“Excuse me?” Endeavor asks, a step above being deadly. “And what is that supposed to mean, you rat?”

Midoriya scratches at his neck incessantly, no doubt a nervous tic. “It means exactly how it sounds. You’re the only person I can go to for help with this.”

“What would make you think I care about what you want?”

The real question is thinly hidden: *why me?*

Midoriya opens his mouth and then closes it again, frustration coming over his scarred features. He huffs in irritation before smoothing over his expression and saying uncomfortably, “Because soon we’re going to be fighting the same enemy. And I… I trust that out of nearly all the other heroes, you’re the one who would do things right, no matter the cost.”

“Enemy?” Shouto cuts in, hackles rising.

“I—*we* can tell you all about it later, I promise,” Midoriya says to both of them before focusing on Endeavor again, “but first I just—I need you to give me a chance, because if you do, I’ll be able to better help everyone with your approval backing me up. Please,” he adds rather lamely. “You know I wouldn’t ask you if it wasn’t necessary.”

There’s a long stretch of silence where none of the occupants in the room know what to say. Shouto is alarmed, and bells are blaring inside his mind. Midoriya is being vague for a reason, likely because Shouto is here and he doesn’t want him to hear this—which hurts, Shouto will admit, but he can also recognize that Midoriya’s duties are far different from his own, and so he must have different responsibilities and expectations.

Responsibilities that can’t include Shouto. And why would they, anyway?

Endeavor’s keen gaze rakes over Midoriya, and Shouto wonders if he’s thinking of all the times he’s chased Rabbit before. Is Midoriya also thinking of all the nights where he had to limp home, sore and smoky, after just barely escaping Endeavor—more out of luck than skill?

Are all of their past interactions boiling down to this?

“What do you need from me specifically?” Endeavor grunts after a while.

Midoriya forces himself to his feet, and Shouto watches how gingerly he moves. He can’t tell if he’s actually injured or if he’s moving slowly so as to show compliance in the number two hero’s estate. Either way, it makes Shouto grimace.

“Just a signature for now,” Midoriya answers, and he procures papers

from his back pocket. “The Public Safety Commission is willing to take me in and offer me resources if it means I’ll help them with their issues. But the catch is I need a high-ranking pro to—”

“To vouch for you,” Endeavor says flatly.

Shouto’s confusion increases. “Did All Might refuse?”

At this, Midoriya averts his gaze. “I didn’t ask him.”

Endeavor sniffs and lifts his head. “So I’m your first choice?”

Midoriya nods, and Shouto’s lips part. “Seriously?” He asks, which causes his friend’s lips to quirk up.

Smugness radiates off of Endeavor before being stamped out. “And why couldn’t you ask your teachers? I’m sure they’re *more* than aware of your situation.” He says it with unbridled disgust, and both Midoriya and Shouto stiffen at this.

That’s right, Shouto thinks, *of course Aizawa-sensei and the others already know. But what will Father do with that information?*

Midoriya grows defensive quickly. “I’m not saying anything else until you give me an answer. Will you sign or not?”

Endeavor looks over the papers Midoriya brought. It’s obviously a contract of some sort. “Hawks knows about this?”

“He’s the one who gave me the proposal.”

“Of course,” Endeavor growls. “That night after dinner—I knew there was something else going on. Him and his idiotic excuse for—” He stops himself, brows raising, before turning to Shouto. “Go. I need a minute with your *classmate.* Alone.”

Shouto bristles. “I’m not leaving.”

“I won’t harm him,” Endeavor says, rolling his eyes. “At least until he steps out of—”

“I’ll be okay,” Midoriya interrupts before Endeavor can worsen his case. The boy steps towards Shouto, and he’s close, *really* close. Shouto feels his cheeks warm up, and his eyes fall to Midoriya’s lips for a brief moment when he continues. “You should sleep. I’ll see you tomorrow, Shouto.”

Shouto.

He swallows past a lump in his throat. “We don’t have school tomorrow.”

“We can only see each other when we’re at school?”

“Oh.” The implication makes Shouto falter a little, completely forgetting about the situation. He nods jerkily once, then twice, before nervously taking a step back. “Okay. I’ll see you… tomorrow.”

Midoriya’s emerald gaze glitters. “Text me where you want to meet,” he says, and his hand brushes Shouto’s left shoulder—a silent farewell.

“Keep your hands to yourself!” Endeavor barks, but Midoriya’s touch leaves before the man can slap his hand away.

Warmth floods Shouto again, and he finds himself wishing the feeling of Midoriya’s fingers would linger on him for longer.

With another reassuring look from his classmate, Shouto begrudgingly retreats, albeit slowly. He doesn’t think this is a good idea, and he *really* wants more information, but if Midoriya wants him to step out, he will.

But that doesn’t mean he has to sleep.

Izuku likes to think he has Endeavor cornered.

Well, not *cornered,* but in a good spot, at least. If he signs for Izuku, that means he won’t be able to shittalk him anymore, not publically. That *also* means he can’t attempt to get UA in trouble in the likely event that Rabbit’s identity is revealed in the future.

Any bad press on Rabbit or UA, Endeavor’s old school, would just fall back onto Endeavor and make his popularity plummet even further—which isn’t that hard, to be honest. But this would only happen if he signed to vouch for him. If he *doesn’t* sign, and he ends up saying something—revealing Rabbit’s identity, outing his goals, or accusing

UA of harboring a criminal, to name a few—still, even more issues would arise.

Shouto would get in trouble, because Izuku knows the boy would be the *first* to defend him. UA would fight back, and even All Might would come to Izuku's defense.

A civil war of some kind would start—and Izuku is sure the Commission wouldn't allow something like that. They'd crack down on *both* Izuku and Endeavor.

And it's so obvious that Endeavor realizes all of this. That's probably why he hasn't attempted to out Izuku yet. He knows the risks, and even though he hates All Might, Izuku knows without a shadow of doubt that he still respects him greatly. And he would *not* do something like that to his rival.

The point is clear: Endeavor has no way of bringing Rabbit to justice now without hurting hero society, particularly himself, as a whole.

Which means he has no reason to *not* sign. Especially with what Izuku is about to tell him.

"I still have half a mind to beat your ass for involving my son, you know," Endeavor says, though surprisingly there's not an ounce of actual aggression in his tone. "It was foolish of you. How many more of your friends have you burdened with this? That blond boy?"

Izuku sours. *Why does everyone call him that?*

"He has a name, but whether he knows or not is none of your business," he says, his first real warning coming out of him. "What matters right now is that we… *I* need your help."

"You said that. Get to the point, or make yourself scarce."

What an old ass saying… so annoying.

Izuku swallows and calms his rising irritation. He can trust him, he knows. As unlikeable and horrible as Endeavor is, he is still a hero, and he is probably the best bet Izuku has right now besides All Might and Sir Nighteye.

And Sir Nighteye is next anyway.

Breathing deeply, Izuku scans one more time to make sure there aren't

any recording devices near—although he can still sense Shouto lingering around the corner some ways away—before starting.

“When I was growing up,” he begins quietly, staring at Endeavor’s chin with his fists clenched behind him, his voice quivering, “I was around a man who killed heroes for fun. He did it as a sport.”

As he speaks, Endeavor’s expression sharpens. “A villain?”

His interruption makes Izuku want to snap suddenly, as of fucking *course* Izuku is talking about a villain. What kind of hero does Endeavor know that commits mass fucking murder? He reels his bitterness back, however, as he knows how serious and important this situation is.

Like it or not, Izuku does genuinely need Endeavor’s support.

He shakes his head, however. “He killed villains too if they got in his way. So, whatever is worse than a villain, I guess—that’s him.” His gaze falls. “He’s lived for centuries now; he’s actually a part of the first generation of quirk users. You’ve probably heard of him before but never knew it.”

“What about him?”

“All Might fought him around six years back. Nearly died doing so. And he thought he killed him.”

Endeavor moves forward, intrigued. Izuku tries not to feel threatened by his large figure. “He thought?” He echoes, unconvinced, as if the very idea of All Might not being able to finish someone off is foreign to him.

Izuku shrugs. “He smashed his face in, and his heart stopped. They took his body to the morgue and everything. All Might had no reason to believe he would survive.”

“And you’re telling me this now, why? Because he’s returned?” There’s caution in his words that his gruffness can’t hide.

“Yes. But—” Izuku’s voice cracks painfully, and he turns away for a moment. It hurts even worse to be showing this level of vulnerability around the flame hero of all people. “But not just him. He… he has a son. And he’s been building up more followers. Like a—a *league* of sorts. If my clients are right, and they usually are, he has more villains at his disposal. Strong ones. He’s always been good at that:

manipulating."

"What makes him so powerful, besides his experience?"

Izuku doesn't let himself hesitate. "Because he has multiple quirks."

The confession is easier this time around now that he's already breathed the words before to Aizawa and the others. It's a lighter weight, but it's still daunting. It still fills Izuku with *terror* while he waits for Endeavor's reply, while he stands there like a pig waiting for slaughter for the hero to give *any* kind of reaction that would point toward him being accepting of—

"Like the Nomu do," Endeavor connects, and he's looking somewhere far away too, his brain working fast.

"He created them."

"That's his army?" The flame hero mutters darkly, eye twitching. "I figured it was the work of one person. This makes things simpler."

Izuku trembles. "It's not simple."

Endeavor turns on him, eyes piercing. "Why? Because you're one of them?"

Yards away, Shouto jerks in the shadows. Izuku doesn't say a word, having already prepared himself for such a statement. The air in the room has turned static, and Izuku feels like he's caught in the middle of an unprotected field in the midst of a thunderstorm. His curls are lifting towards the ceiling in warning.

"Everyone has seen all of your different *displays,* Rabbit," Endeavor continues relentlessly, though not exactly unkindly. It seems he knows he's holding something over Izuku. "Half the world thinks you're one of the Nomu."

Are you? Comes the silent question, the accusation he's been faced with in the mirror for the past five years of his life.

One for All hums beneath his skin, warring with Extract's hunger, and Izuku doesn't want to lie anymore.

"It's as I said," he offers, hating how his body involuntarily submits when Endeavor takes another step closer, "I was around him when I was young."

Don't make me say it in front of Shouto, he pleads.

"And that's why that creature picked you up during Hosu," Endeavor bites, all hard edges and sharp words. "Out of the other people there, it went for you, didn't it? Because it *knew you."*

Endeavor's cloying presence is a plague on Izuku's soul. It has always reminded Izuku a little too much of his father, of his fiery nature and extremely large build. "I know a lot of things about All for One—uh, that's his name." He tips his head. "Well, what he called himself, I guess. And because I—I know the most, I've been trying to help some of the heroes prepare. Because he's planning something big. I know he is. The attack on USJ, Hosu, the Nomu—it's all him, and that's just the beginning."

"You're All Might's successor because of this?"

Izuku blinks in mild surprise. He honestly didn't expect the word *successor* to come out of Endeavor's mouth. He didn't even sound angry when he asked, either. Izuku breathes out heavily. "No? Sort of. I'm—I'm not his successor. I'm just his student."

"That's not what he told me."

For once, Izuku feels something akin to hope kindling inside him. *He talked to you about me?* He thinks before abruptly pushing those thoughts away. "All Might doesn't, uh, exactly know… about me…" He gesticulates with his hands. *"Knowing* All for One as well as I do, I mean."

Endeavor starts. "You're telling me about this before you've told *him?* Why?" He demands, seemingly outraged on All Might's behalf.

His tone has Izuku backing up just a little to not be noticeable. "He—All for One—he… he killed All Might's master. And all the other predecessors that came before her, too." Izuku's tongue is dry. "That's why."

This time, Endeavor is the one stunned into silence. After a few moments, dark understanding crosses over him. "You're scared."

Izuku doesn't attempt to defend himself even as his younger self screams at him to correct Endeavor. Instead, he clears his throat and forges on. "When he comes back, we'll need you to already be aware of the things he can do. All Might has fought him, but I've been up close and personal with him for far longer. I have to tell you and

everyone else what to expect. *We* need to be prepared, because he—he's not just *some* villain, you know? He's…" Izuku shakes himself and points at the papers held in Endeavor's hands. "If you sign this document with me, you'll be included in the effort. And I—I'll do anything you ask. *Anything.* I promise you. I just—I really need your help. Because I don't know if even All Might can kill him now, not since he's grown so much stronger. Eventually, the other high ranking pros will have to be in on this as well, but for now I have to start with just you. If I can get into the Commission, we can plan more things, strengthen the defenses, come up with safeguards—*everything."* He looks down again, eyes closing. "Some of the public still doesn't trust me. Heroes, too, especially after Hosu. If you back me up, chances are they'll at least trust *you* enough to trust me."

When Izuku finishes, Endeavor's eyes are shadowed, and he's staring down at him with something like trepidation. But of course, a moment later it's gone.

"Are you done groveling?" He huffs, and Izuku digs his fingernails into his palms.

"That depends. Are you going to sign it or not?"

At this, Endeavor gives a chuckle—the mere sound of it has Izuku's heart soaring. That's a good sign, isn't it? That has to be! Actually, the fact that Endeavor hasn't killed Izuku yet for admitting to knowing such a cruel supervillain is proof enough that he's doing something right.

"Sit back down," Endeavor orders, and Izuku obeys. "It's my turn to ask you something, and you better shut up while I do." He sits in the seat at the head of the table, smoothing out the documents Izuku gave him as he places them on the table. He was busy reading it all over while they were talking.

Endeavor is one hell of a multitasker.

Izuku watches his every movement, just praying. He's nearing his curfew, but he knows he can't rush something like this. He's so, so close.

Todoroki Enji quirks a red brow. "In the meantime?" He asks. "Be useful for once and hand me that pen."

“You don’t get it, do you?”

He stares into the eyes of a young boy, counting the freckles dusting his cheeks. It’s the perfect number. The positioning of each is identical to the real thing. He files the number of dark freckles away in his mind and adds on the amount of lighter ones he can see. He moves around the hologram, appreciating and criticizing.

The tiny dots litter the boy’s arms and shoulders and run down to his back, stopping beneath the shoulder blades.

It’s only when he finishes his scrutinization that he answers Kyudai.

“What don’t I get?” He murmurs, turning to face his partner.

“You’ve seen the things he’s capable of,” Kyudai answers, his goggles refracting the light of the hologram before him. “You can feel it now, can’t you?”

Kyudai presses a button, and the model morphs into a bloodied version of the boy previously shown. Black tendrils shoot out from his bare back and create writhing wings. The sound of the whips pushing against each other, consuming each other and fighting—it’s music to All for One’s ears.

“Your theory was correct,” he muses, reaching out to let his fingers pass through the holographic wings.

“Our theory,” Kyudai corrects with a certain kind of mania reflected in those blue eyes. “Let’s not forget, this wouldn’t have been possible without your interference.”

All for One smiles a little, teeth glinting in the light as he throws his head to the side. “Come now, it was your grandson who managed to get his claws on him. Without your sacrifice, my son would have never pushed himself to use his power so desperately.” He moves to stand before the model once more, his gaze now on the sizable burn marks on his palms.

It’s an older rendition of Izuku, sure, but that’s only because the

doctor hasn't had a chance to explore the boy's body again in years. Any new scarring or changes are unseen to both him and All for One —science only goes so far in predicting that sort of thing.

"And yes," All for One continues, his words a low rumble, "I can sense him far more clearly these days. That's not only due to your excellent work in reshaping me, surprisingly. Izuku is indeed getting stronger with age. With the circumstances we've pushed on him, he is finally allowing himself to figure his abilities out. He has opened up his mind, and his quirk is consequently more readily available to me."

Kyudai rises from his chair and walks to stand near him—but never beside; he's always a step or two behind, though All for One wouldn't care if he didn't take such careful measures around him. With Kyudai, he owes him a lot of things. While they may not be equals, the doctor is probably the only individual All for One would ever describe to be his friend.

"His body fused those powers together," Kyudai states. "It is not even the work of Extract, I wager. Rather, it is simply the evolved version of *your* innate abilities. Your natural predisposition to condensing quirks was passed on to him, allowing him to mutate the very core of the powers he receives." Kyudai locks his fingers behind his back. "Not even you can force two quirks to fuse together like that, not without genetic modification on my part. You can only use them in tandem if you focus all of your energy into it, which is quite draining, I suppose. It's also not permanent like his abilities seem to be."

All for One hums appreciatively. "His was a skill born out of necessity. It is peak evolution."

"He doesn't even realize he can do it. It's a shame. He was born with your brain."

"He's always been smart," All for One begins, "as I'm sure you know very well. But his fault lies in the fact that he's much nicer than I ever was. While he has wits—I would not have kept him had he not—I imagine he hasn't thought of all of this as a possibility yet. Why would he? What could he possibly need to defend against—heroically, that is —that would require him to need such a tool?"

"If I were in his shoes, I'd say you, perhaps."

All for One gives a hearty laugh at that. The model of his son contorts, dropping to a defensive crouch with a hardened black shield wrapping around him. More possibilities of this quirk mutating power show,

outlining the potential problems All for One may have in the future in containing Izuku.

“He must know I wouldn’t have harmed him had he only decided to come back willingly,” he offers into the silence, a sudden bitterness overtaking him again. “It has been far too long of his childish behavior. I’d have thought he would grow out of it by now.”

“I advised you to take him the moment he was born,” Kyudai says with a sigh. “His mother’s will, as short-lived as it was, has hardened him more than you ever have.”

All for One’s face darkens considerably. “It is not just her. My foolish brother has not given up.”

Kyudai glances at him out of the corner of his eye. “Yes. That likely has a much bigger effect. I suppose being haunted by worthless creatures inside a stolen quirk would mess with your brain in such a way. You eventually have to ask yourself if you could blame a person in a situation like this.”

“I have given Izuku many chances.”

“How many more until you finally give him the end he asks for?”

The bold question makes All for One turn. He stares down at his partner, searching his guarded expression. “You used to protest at the idea of me scrapping him. Now, however, you’ve changed your mind. Don’t tell me you think Tomura is the better choice now, after all these years?”

“If Izuku were willing from the start,” Kyudai points out, “he would have made the perfect specimen—both as your successor and as a hero killer. With your intelligence and his own increased strength, he would have remained undefeated in the empire you’d create. His *rebellion* isn’t a rebellion anymore so much as it is an act of war on himself and everything we’ve stood for. He is old enough now to know better.”

All for One takes in these words, not breaking his gaze away. Kyudai holds it when he continues, his words burning with the intensity of his voice.

“He will not bend. Not even my efforts back then made him compliant for long. He will not submit as he did when he was younger, I guarantee you. It is much safer to write him off as a loss and use his

body for harvesting quirks. That is the best we can use him for. And look what his blood has already accomplished with restoring you? He will be more useful in death."

"You forget one thing," All for One cuts in, eyes narrowing. He can't say he's appreciative of the way Kyudai is pushing for Izuku's execution so that he can get his hands on him again and run more tests, but he knows Kyudai's words hold some truth.

The discrepancy here, however, is that Kyudai has always been more of a hermit. He's not a social person, and he has a remarkably bad time at connecting with or understanding others. Thus, he isn't familiar with just how far someone will stoop in order to protect the people they care for.

All for One swipes up on the hologram, and there it is—the picture he absolutely despises. The one that made him shake *violently* the moment Kurogiri described it to him.

Rabbit and All Might, smiling together in front of the light of the dying sun, fists reaching towards each other in a manner that is much too comfortable and familiar for All for One's liking. And there, peeking out from the top of All Might's costume, is a tiny necklace with the UA logo hanging from it.

Despite his sheer anger towards this photo in particular, All for One knows that all of this has meaning.

He leans forward, hand resting on Kyudai's shoulder as he turns him to look at the photo.

"This time around, he has more to lose than just himself."

Endeavor warned Izuku that he would be in contact with his teachers about all of this. This is because Izuku admitted to him that he doesn't live with his parents—precisely because he wouldn't *want* to live with

his mother and also *can't* live with his father. Izuku, albeit hesitantly, ended up telling Endeavor about how he lives under UA's guardianship.

Which, of course, practically confirmed Endeavor's suspicions of him being housed by his teachers.

"Let me guess," he asked sourly, *"you live with All Might?"*

Izuku almost laughed in his face, though to be fair he has gone to the hero's penthouse a couple of times, so it's not that far-fetched.

Endeavor was still just as bitter when Izuku denied the claim, as he said he will one hundred percent snitch on Izuku anyway if the boy doesn't tell his teachers first about what he did.

So, Izuku knows he needs to do it himself before the flame hero gets to it. If Yamada has to find out from *Endeavor* about Izuku breaking into his home and revealing his identity? Yeah, Izuku wouldn't make it to the next sunrise.

He walks around with Shouto for a few hours first, however, and they go to an isolated park at the edge of the nearby snowy forest. He likes being around Shouto. He's warm, but not scorching like his father is. He's the perfect balance, and his eyes are so expressive. If just anyone glanced at Shouto on any given day, they probably wouldn't find much of anything in his expression. Shouto always looks cool, unbothered, or—at the very most—slightly annoyed.

But Izuku, who has witnessed his friend on one of the worst nights of his life during Hosu, can see everything. It feels nice to have someone he can trust so openly and without hesitation. Kacchan was that person for Izuku before, and maybe he still is, in some way, but things are different now and never will be the way they were. It's Izuku's fault, and he knows it. He only prays he won't screw up with Shouto too.

He doesn't want to lose anyone else.

When they lapse into a comforting silence sometime after Izuku finishes explaining everything he mentioned the night before, he sees Shouto's brows draw together slightly. He has a sweater on, and it's a soft blue color. Izuku likes it.

"You okay?" Izuku asks, staring at the ground as they walk. The crunch of dead leaves and snow beneath his red shoes fills the void

between them.

Shouto blinks. “Yes.”

“You look distracted.”

“Sorry,” Shouto says, and he’s looking at the swaying branches touching above them now.

“No, it’s okay.” Izuku puts his hands in his pockets. They’re walking close to each other, their jackets brushing together slightly. “It’s kinda pretty out today, isn’t it?”

His friend looks at him, his voice barely above a whisper. “Really pretty,” he says.

“The sky isn’t even gray yet, which is surprising. Everything feels so… alive, even though it’s snowing.”

Shouto nods. “I don’t like this cold so much, though.”

Izuku giggles. “I thought your left side made you hot all the time?”

He gets a shrug in return. “When it gets this cold, it messes up my temperature regulation, and it’s harder to use my fire.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing you’re practicing with it more.”

Shouto thinks about this before conceding with a nod. Sensing his friend growing distracted again, Izuku moves in front of him and turns around to face him, grinning widely.

“Why don’t we try it out now?” He asks, and Shouto glances around.

“Here?”

“There’s no one around, so it’ll be fine. Plus, I’m sorta cold, too. We could both use some fire right about now.”

“Okay.” Shouto raises his palm and attempts to take off his glove, but Izuku stops him.

“The heat comes out of your pores, right?” He asks, stepping close to him. “It opens them up, whereas your ice closes them on the right side. That’s why you have a harder time in the cold—it closes your pores on your left side when you need them open for the best heat output. So, what if you kept the glove on? It would ensure your palm

is still warm, making it easier for you to expel some fire."

"It'll just burn off anyway," Shouto counters, confused.

"It's thin enough that if you focus your heat to reside just within your pores until the last second, you might be able to actually materialize the flames *just* outside of your glove. Plus, this material is naturally fire resistant to an extent. I used it for my first costumes." At his friend's blank stare, Izuku rests his fingers on the back of Shouto's hand and moves it up so his palm is between them. "Think about warming your hand up, but don't create any flames just yet."

Shouto obeys, a crease in between his brows, and for a moment they both watch. There's not much to see at first, but Izuku can feel the growing heat coming from Shouto's palm. It warms his face and makes him exhale at the goosebumps he gets.

The glove begins to sizzle, and Izuku shakes his head. "Too far outward. Keep it just beneath the skin, and build it up."

He shifts his hold on the back of his hand, and eventually Izuku is able to see what he's looking for. He smiles to himself, satisfied, and looks up at Shouto, whose eyes are already on him.

"See? That's what you want." He points, and Shouto follows his gaze. There are tiny heat waves rising above his glove, similar to the ones you'd see above a grill or near a heater. "Heat rises in the air, so as long as you keep your palm pointed upwards when you do this, it'll work. Now, release it—but not all at once. That's what makes it fire, right? So, just think of the heat like a gas, and don't actually light it up until it's nearly all the way through the glove, that way you can still give it the last boost of heat to spark it without taking your clothes with it."

Shouto hesitates. "You should probably stand back if it doesn't work."

Izuku only smiles again. "It will."

In the next second, a ball of orange fire erupts from his hand and crackles, whipping slightly with the breeze. The sound is soothing for Izuku, who is giddy at the success. When he looks up, Shouto's eyes are glittering with the glow of the flames. The ball grows wild in the wind, and Izuku moves even closer to make sure it won't snuff out.

Shouto jerks. "You're going to get burned."

Izuku lets Black Whip form along his arm and wrap around his hand like a secondary skin, and he slowly moves his fingers through the blistering flames. He laughs cheekily at the shocked look on Shouto's face. "My whips are more weak to ice than they are to fire. If you wanted to, you could freeze them and snap them off." An idea pops in Izuku's head, and he quickly skips back a few yards. "Hey, wanna have a fireball fight? It's good practice!"

"Uh, Midoriya, I think—"

"Izuku," the boy corrects, not breaking his gaze.

Shouto visibly swallows, and his face burns red when he lets his fire extinguish. "Izuku. I… don't *normal* people have snowball fights instead?"

"Oh, so you just wanna be able to cheat, huh?" Izuku accuses teasingly. "You wouldn't even have to take the time to collect any snow! At least with a fireball, I can catch it and launch it back at you."

Finally, there's another emotion overcoming Shouto: *humor.* It stretches across his face, lighting up his features, and Izuku knows he has him. The boy is the first to make a move—in a manner similar to how his father did last night, he sends a fireball hurtling through the air towards Izuku. It's small, granted, and it's not moving *nearly* as fast as Endeavor's monster-sized ones, but Izuku can notice the inherent similarities in how they move.

Izuku catches it with both hands covered in Black Whip this time, feeling the quirk shudder within him as the heat is absorbed. He uses the same momentum to send it right back, and Shouto moves to the right so it misses him and dissipates in thin air.

He quickly makes another, this one more confident than the previous, and the cycle continues for the next half hour.

Since Shouto doesn't have the ability to *manipulate* fire, only expel it and send it in one direction or the next, he isn't able to control the fireball for long. Which means he is constantly remaking them—naturally, this was Izuku's plan in the first place.

This is practice for Shouto just as much as it is practice for Izuku; while Black Whip can handle the extreme heat, being subjected to multiple blasts one after the other is still taking its toll on it, so Izuku has to reinforce it consciously after every few fireballs he catches.

But maybe Izuku didn't suggest this game just to make Shouto practice. Maybe he thought it would be fun. Maybe he wanted Shouto to keep looking at him in that carefree, flighty way for as long as possible.

They navigate their way through the empty park as they fight, and the whole time, Shouto's glove stays intact.

Somewhere in the middle of it, however, Izuku's skull shrieks. There's a siren in his brain, and he feels an overwhelming sense of impending doom. *Danger,* his body warns him, *danger!* Except when he spins around, eyes wide and Extract searching the entire forest and city for anything amiss, he can't find anything wrong.

The siren keeps blaring, and Izuku's stomach fucking *hurts,* but he doesn't sense anything familiar. The feeling is wrong, and it's terrifying, and Izuku suddenly feels like he's about to get caught in a deadly trap before he can figure out what it even is or where it came from.

This can't be Fourth's quirk, can it?

Naturally, he immediately thinks the worst. Because there's only two reasons why his body would be warning him so violently of something: All for One, or One for All.

Just as quickly as it came, however, it's gone, leaving Izuku's ears ringing and his breaths coming up short.

His moment of hesitation is enough to screw him over. He hears the next blast of scorching heat hurtling his way, and Shouto yells out something like a warning, but Izuku doesn't come back to himself fast enough. The large fireball hits his cheek just after Black Whip manages to cover his face without Izuku asking it to, and the boy is sent sprawling from the sheer force behind it. His back slides against the muddy, snowy ground until he comes to a stop beneath a tree, where a glob of snow conveniently crashes down right on top of him.

The chilly darkness surrounds him, filling up his ears, but the silence is a blessing as the ringing subsides. Shouto yanks him out just a moment later with his expression panicked. Guilt leaks into the air from his person, and Izuku blinks away stars.

"Are you okay?" Shouto asks, face inches from his. His hand swipes away the residue of snow and Black Whip and stares at the offending red mark underneath. "Shit, I didn't see you stop. I'm sorry, Midoriya

__”

“It’s Izuku,” he complains irritably before sitting up and promptly sneezing. Shouto moves back, already conjuring up ice for him. “And it’s alright. It’s already healing up.”

Izuku’s face burns even worse now, but not from the fireball.

“It was my fault,” he assures. “I was distracted.”

Shouto seems to deflate upon seeing the burn begin to fade away, and he eyes the dead skin peeling itself from Izuku’s cheek. He sits back on his heels and presses a hand to his forehead, still so obviously guilty. But he must see the way Izuku is looking around still, searching for something Shouto can’t see, because his eyes narrow slightly.

“You’re paranoid,” he says to Izuku quietly. “Are you looking for him?”

Izuku rubs his cheek, finally allowing himself to relax a little when his heartbeat slows to a normal rate and his body stops trembling from the sudden high. “I always am. But I don’t know what that was about. Sorry about that.”

Shouto offers him a hand to stand up. When he speaks, his voice is low but firm. “You told my old man last night that you needed help, but I don’t think you need to worry so much. All Might fought the villain before and won, and he’ll do it again if he has the help of everyone else, too. He’s the strongest.”

Izuku takes the hand and decides not to say that even being the strongest can’t save a person from his father.

Toshinori is cursed, most likely.

That has to be the only likely explanation as to why he had a steaming pipe in his right abdomen just a few hours ago. It went all the way through, so he couldn’t take it out during the fight, but he’s grateful that he had at least eliminated all the other creatures before going for that last one, as it proved to be the most time-consuming.

He should’ve seen it coming. He heard the structures cracking, he felt

the earth shake, he saw the two skyscrapers crumbling—but the Nomu was *fleeing* right through it, and if he let it go, it would've taken him another few days to track it down again due to its refraction quirk, and who knows how many more it would've killed in that time?

The other international heroes on scene were either down for the count or preoccupied with getting the slower civilians out of the area, as the damage radius was growing bigger by the millisecond.

So, just as most things end up being, it was Toshinori's responsibility to take care of it.

It was all a whirlwind of pain and flying debris, but at the end of it, Toshinori came out on top. He escaped most of the buildings' rubble by the skin of his teeth—he would actually argue he's quite lucky for *only* getting hit with the pipe.

He had to leave it in for seven minutes and thirty-eight seconds while he chased the last Nomu and pummeled it to the ground, having to literally *tear* it apart so it wouldn't regenerate anymore.

On top of that, he had to wait another twenty minutes to be put on an operating table so they could remove it and prevent him from losing anymore blood.

It was just in time, too, because Toshinori couldn't see at that point, and he could only hear something like the ocean in his right ear. He had to focus all of his remaining energy on *not* deflating during the operation, which means he had to be kept awake, because if he transformed it would've definitely killed him on the spot.

And it's a surreal thing, being told by a team of horror-struck doctors —some native to the area and some who were flown in to help the Nomu-overrun country—that a *pipe* nearly took out his last remaining lung with the way it was angled.

If Toshinori had gone on for any longer, if he was even a little bit slower than he was while fighting, he wouldn't have made it.

Toshinori, of course, had laughed it off wearily when they finished their spiel, knowing deep down that there was something else horribly wrong with him. He rarely gets injured this badly, and he knows it's because he wasn't on his A-game. He gave it his all, as he always does in *every* situation, but it's also true to say that his mind was in another realm.

“Did that damned pipe hit your brain, too, you fool!” His old teacher shouts into the phone, and Toshinori grimaces before pulling it away from his ear. *“You weren’t supposed to take this long! What’s wrong with you?”*

“I know,” Toshinori appeases, struggling to sit up in his bed. They have him on the strongest medicine there is, and he’s being treated by the very best—no doubt a kind gesture in return for his aid. “It’s not like I was staying for a vacation, Gran. There were over a hundred, and some of them were more advanced than even the ones from Hosu—I’m in the process of sending my notes of them over. Finding them and putting them down was taking me a little longer than expected.”

“Excuses! What were you doing, twiddling your thumbs the whole time?”

“Oh, yes, because that’s what I do every time,” he says drily.

“What the hell’s been up with you these past few weeks, kid? This should’ve been easy for ya.”

His tone is what pushes Toshinori over the edge. “Well, it’s not so easy when you have to worry about saving the other two hundred heroes around you every *five seconds* because there’s no one else *as fast as you!”* He snaps suddenly, his irritation and fear getting the best of him.

Gran Torino only snorts, unperturbed. *“You know damn well that’s not the only reason. You need to stop getting distracted over things that don’t matter! You’ve always let your feelings get in the way.”*

And you haven’t? Toshinori wants to bite back, but he refrains.

He closes his eyes, head pounding. Gran has a point, of course. Toshinori has been thinking of All for One nonstop ever since the USJ attack, and recently it’s only gotten worse. He closes his eyes, and the villain is there. Even when he opens them, he can sense him lurking. He hears his jeers, the crackle of his quirks working altogether, and the *static* that he put in his mind for the entire two decades after Shimura Nana’s death.

When Toshinori is especially tired, he looks at the people he trusts and sees the sides of them he wouldn’t like.

It doesn’t help that this past week especially has been hell for him. The healed crater on the left side of his abdomen has been aching terribly, and no amount of painkillers have helped. He had to see the

doctors in Japan twice before he could be cleared for this mission. They didn't want to let him go, but they sensed the urgency of the situation and the importance, so they did with some hesitance.

They said it's due to physical and emotional stress. He's overworking himself even though he thought he'd been getting better at being less reckless. He didn't want to believe it at first, but honestly the entirety of this mission has only proved it, because he hasn't *not* thought about his successor for even one minute.

And the more he thinks about it, the more he realizes he only struggled a bit with this mission *because* he was so distracted with the things in his mind.

He can't handle this back and forth. He is trying so hard to be understanding and not pushy, as he wants Midoriya to trust him fully and *believe* in him—and he thought, at one point, that Midoriya did—but it's so difficult to gauge now.

"Why is he still avoiding me?" He asks Aizawa after a joint training session. All of the students have gone to the showers, so it's just them out in the field. "And don't say he isn't. I know you see it, too. He's been especially moody today."

Granted, Midoriya wasn't allowed to participate in any heroic activities that day on Chiyo's orders, so Toshinori knows he was likely upset about that, but that doesn't explain why he's avoiding Toshinori specifically as if it's his fault.

Aizawa picks up some of the supplies left behind by their students and ducks his face into his scarf. "Are you asking me as his mentor or as a hero?"

"Does that matter?" Toshinori asks, confused.

Aizawa rolls his eyes. "To him it does."

Toshinori lets his phone fall on his lap. He shivers, bringing the blankets up with his bony arms. He hates this. He hates feeling like this. He's doing everything wrong and he's trying so *hard* to do things right.

Gran is loud enough that he can be heard even when not on speaker. *"God, go home, Toshinori, before you blow yourself up again. You're a mess."*

The hero sighs, staring at the ceiling above him. It still pains him to breathe, but he manages. “They’re keeping me until the morning. I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll see you then, kid.”

To anyone else, it would sound almost like a threat—and it is, really, but Gran’s concern is clear, too. Toshinori does need to talk to him. As embarrassing as it is, he needs to talk to him about how to handle this new situation with Midoriya and the other heroes.

He’s always been really bad at this sort of stuff, and he can’t afford to screw it all up to the point of no return.

What’s frustrating to Toshinori is that it wasn’t like this was a hard mission. It was long, painstaking, and challenging to an extent—but he has fought much, *much* worse villains where he still came out unscathed. The majority of the Nomu were easy to kill once he found them, and the other ones still weren’t *too* bad.

It was, looking at it all after the fact, *simple.*

And that’s always scared him—the gap between him and the others. He doesn’t even think of this snobbishly or with grandeur, only exhaustion. The worst part of being one of the most reliable, versatile, and durable of heroes is that you have to watch out for your slower counterparts and allies too. While you do all the heavy lifting, they pick up your slack and leave you as the main hitter, which is fine. It’s just the logical route, the way things *have* to be.

But this also means *everything* is on you. Every death, every failure, every lapse in judgment—your fault, your mistake.

All Might is named the best, but Toshinori will never be fast enough, he will never be strong enough, and he will never be smart enough.

He is stuck in an endless uphill climb where the weight of the world only grows heavier, chaining him to the ground. With each passing day, he sinks lower and lower.

This mission was easy. He only got hurt by coincidence. He made a decision, and he stuck with it. How many more decisions will he make that will hurt him like this, all in the name of heroics?

Gee, he needs a cigarette. He won’t smoke, though, as he can’t afford to lose his remaining lung.

And that just annoys him too.

Some part of Katsuki regrets agreeing to this study session, partially because he has no patience with the two people he's with and partially because he could be doing *anything* else right now.

Like studying at home. Alone. Or practicing that new move he's been trying to perfect. The move he created with the help of Izuku one night a few months ago. He remembers it with striking clarity: Izuku upside-down with his head hanging over the edge of the bed, pencil in hand as he helped Katsuki work out all the logical aspects of his new ideas.

He was so close that his warmth radiated off of him and made Katsuki sweat. His quirk swelled within him, tingling and sparking, like a bomb about to reach its limit.

Izuku has always had that effect on him, and to Katsuki it never made sense when—

He grits his teeth and grabs a fistful of blond hair, glaring out of the window of the cafe Kirishima and Kaminari dragged him to. It's the same place he would go to with Izuku all the time. The booth in front of Katsuki right now is actually the one they always used. It was theirs.

This reminder only makes him stare more furiously out of the window, searching for something he doesn't know about yet.

"Hey, are you feeling alright, dude?" Kirishima asks, his head popping into view across from Katsuki.

"Why wouldn't I be?" He says gruffly, not looking at him yet.

"Come on, man, you've been acting off all week! Everyone has noticed it. And you haven't touched your homework since we got here!" Kirishima frowns when he leans forward, elbows resting against the table.

"Yeah," Kaminari cuts in, sliding into the seat right beside him. "Plus, you even told me you liked my cologne yesterday morning! I think that was the least mean I've ever seen you be!"

Katsuki turns on him, but before he can snap, Kirishima throws up his hands.

“Okay, okay,” he appeases, smiling and showing off his pointed teeth. “We should really focus now. Midterms are coming up fast, guys.”

Katsuki moves his attention away from the two of them again. *Yeah,* he thinks. *Midterms.*

It’s a chance to prove to himself that he’s been getting stronger, but midterms also mean…

“If I finish up this semester and take the midterm, and pass it,” Izuku breathes, unable to look at Katsuki, “they’ll let me stop school.”

Katsuki grips the ends of his hair even harder, willing away the intrusive memory.

Aizawa-sensei was right, and so was Kirishima. He needs to stop *thinking* so much. He needs to focus on himself, on something… something other than Izuku. And, fuck, Katsuki hates how difficult that is. When did his life start revolving around that nerd? He can’t stand him now. He can barely stand *himself* anymore!

When Kirishima and Kaminari go back up to the front to order more pastries for them, he watches the condensation slide down his glass of water and forces himself to pick up his pen. They’re supposed to be studying the hero laws Midnight assigned them, as they’re going to be tested heavily on their written exams for the midterm.

He writes in the first answer of the homework, and he doesn’t think of Izuku again.

After returning from the park, Izuku finds himself hanging from the ceiling of the office at the apartment, wrapped up in Shouta’s capture weapon. He annoyed his teacher, so now he’s in air prison. It’s an occasion that happens every once in a while, so Izuku is used to it.

So used to it, in fact, that he doesn’t ever abide by the rules of air prison anymore. No talking, for example, is one rule.

This time isn’t his fault, though, he contends, as he still needs to come

clean to the man about where he really went last night. If he doesn't, Endeavor will, and then his teachers will never let him see the light of day again.

"Will you go with me to give Hawks my agreement?" He asks Shouta after a while of spinning around slowly in the air.

Shouta doesn't pause in his writing. He pushes his glasses further up his nose. "Most likely, but you still need a pro to sign with you, don't you?"

"I already have one."

"Who? All Might?"

"Endeavor."

Shouta's pen stops mid stroke. He is frozen for a solid minute, as if processing what was said, before finally turning to look up at his student. Izuku holds eye contact, forcing himself to remain calm.

If he freaks out, Shouta will too. He's a master at sensing emotions.

It's not like Izuku has a choice about this. He's not going to lie about choosing Endeavor. Hound Dog said he has to be open, and Izuku is just so *sick* of lying to the people who are actively laying down their lives to help him. He wants to try to keep the bridges connecting him to the heroes open for as long as possible.

The fact he's still been given so many chances, even after everything he's done and admitted to being, speaks volumes.

He waits for any sign of anger or frustration, but he gets none of those things from Shouta. The man leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, brows pinched. "When was this?"

"Last night," Izuku says sheepishly.

"Why didn't you tell me beforehand?"

"You wouldn't have let me go if I did."

Shouta blinks, then nods, as if conceding that Izuku has a point. This makes Izuku smile a little.

The capture weapon unfurls around him without Shouta moving an inch, and Izuku drops to the ground with a startled squawk. He wipes

his hands on his pants, and Shouta props a leg up on his knee. “I take it you showed him your face?”

“It was the only way to get him to trust me.”

“And *you* trust *him?”*

Izuku laughs a little, but it’s not humorous. This is a more personal question that extends beyond a simple yes or no, so he wants to formulate a good response. He looks away first, feeling nervous now. “You know I don’t like him. He’s always been a little… a little too much for me, like in his demeanor and the—the way he presents himself. But I do see how much he cares about others, even though it doesn’t seem like it.” His nose wrinkles. “At *all.”*

Shouta grunts in agreement but lets him finish.

“More than anything, though, he’s a good hero who will do anything to protect the state of society. That’s a fact. And he’s really, *really* strong. I mean, the gap between him and All Might is still *huge,* but that doesn’t mean he’s still not strong in his own right. He’s useful, and also a necessity.” Izuku fiddles with his hands, but this time he doesn’t press his nails into the skin. “I, uh, told him a little about the threats we’re facing, and why I need him to sign for me. So, yeah. I—I trust he won’t hurt me or blow everything for us if it means he can help the world, at least.”

Shouta accepts the argument pretty easily. “Have you told Yagi yet?”

Izuku sours. “No.”

“He’ll be back from his trip tomorrow. You should see him.” When he sees the displeased look on Izuku’s face, Shouta turns away and goes back to work. “And maybe apologize for the way you’ve been ignoring him.”

“I’m not *ignoring* him, but you know why I can’t be near him right now.”

“Not telling him about your father or the nature of your quirk is your choice, and there are ways around that which *don’t* include brushing him aside like he’s nothing. He doesn’t deserve that. Remember, kid, that he will eventually have to learn it all someday.”

Izuku huffs, rolling his eyes. “When did you start being his best friend?”

Shouta throws him an unimpressed look. “Cut the attitude,” he says, and Izuku surprisingly listens, but not without one last complaint.

“That wasn’t even an attitude,” he mutters, sitting in Hizashi’s chair and resting his cheek against the cool wood of his desk. He’s not in air prison anymore, so he could leave the office and do whatever he wants, really, but he doesn’t want to. Sitting in the same room with Shouta sometimes, even in complete silence, is soothing for his brain. He hopes he hasn’t been annoying the man with how often he’s been following him around lately.

After a half hour of nothing but the sound of pen dragging against paper and the ruffling of files, Shouta turns off his lamp and stands up, shooing Izuku to his feet.

“Come on,” he says, “out.”

Shouta’s push out of the office is all it takes for Izuku to find some courage. “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did.”

“You know that case I was telling you about? The one with the girl?”

“The Yakuza one?”

“Yeah.” Izuku follows his teacher down the hall. “Are you still gonna help me with it?”

Shouta gives him a considerate look. “Of course, kid.” He then presses down hard on Izuku’s head until the boy protests and pushes the hand off. “We’ve wasted enough time as it is, so we should get a move on. If the Commission decides they can’t help, I’ll see what my partner agencies say. We’ll need a lot of numbers if we want to do this right.”

Izuku hangs back in the mouth of the hallway and watches Shouta enter the kitchen to start dinner, thinking of how quickly the man responded. He didn’t even hesitate, did he?

He sees that bridge in his mind again, but it doesn’t feel rickety or half-finished this time.

Is this how things were always meant to be? Could he have had this feeling in his chest for a much longer time, if only he wasn’t so scared before?

It's weird—that thought. He is terrified of crossing bridges like this, because he knows more than anyone that bridges don't last forever. Some last for decades, while others last for only a short stretch of time. He's always been scared of walking on the latter without knowing it. But it's no matter. For his new friends, his family, and that *girl,* he will do it now.

He *wants* to do it.

Maybe this is what Hound Dog meant during one of their sessions when he said that a lot of Izuku's suffering so far has been due to a block in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

> and you could buy up all the stars but it wouldn't change who you are, you're still living life in the dark. it's just who you are
>
> t

hastur's plea

Chapter Notes

> i called danger sense the fifth user's quirk in the last chap. pay no attention to that, i can't count. danger sense belongs to the fourth

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of his clients is dead.

Izuku stares at the photos he was sent on his phone, his face shadowed. It was obviously not an accident—unless there is a universe where a body *can* spontaneously explode from the inside.

But this is not such a universe. The more obvious explanation is that Izuku's client was murdered. And brutally so.

Not to point fingers or anything, but this is very similar to a certain someone's quirk Izuku has been studying for the past month straight. Which means Izuku is now *beyond* pissed, and also more determined than ever.

He has already asked Kaida to make sure the members of the Club keep their guard up. Patrols around the city have been extended to the neighboring districts too, and the numbers of them have increased. In addition, there are to be an extra four members in each unit, all equipped with high-end technology to ensure the fastest response time in the event of an emergency.

The Champions on the other end of Japan are reporting to him now, giving their own research and data. Izuku couldn't be more grateful.

Another issue is that the doctor won't be available for a couple of weeks, as he's been asked to help with an uptick of wounded members in the district on the opposite coast. Izuku doesn't like this idea so much, but he has no real reason to object, so he concedes. Soon, he has to return to his Club location to retrieve a gift the doctor supposedly left him, but for now it's not a priority.

All in all, it's an incredibly stressful start to the day. Izuku tries to pay attention in class, but he can only do so much with the weight of all this on his back. And so, right after lunch, Izuku isn't paying as much attention to his surroundings as he could be.

He should've learned from the incident with Shouto yesterday, honestly.

He's walking beside Uraraka, listening to her talk excitedly about the trip she has planned with her parents—a first in years. He replies to her in kind every once in a while, trying to focus on what she's saying while his mind is in an entirely different world. He's grateful he has her with him, though, as she's always been a wonderful person to be around. She keeps him on his toes, and they call nearly every day.

It's his attention being divided twice already that makes it difficult for Izuku to sense what comes next.

Extract, to its credit, warns him of Copy the moment it gets within thirty feet of him, but Izuku pushes it aside in favor of thinking about how exactly he's going to get on Sir Nighteye's good side after school.

And so, when Monoma approaches him after emerging from the throng of students, Izuku is caught off guard.

The halls are so loud that if Monoma hadn't stepped right in front of him, Izuku wouldn't have heard what he said at all—at least, he wouldn't have thought it was towards him.

"Hey," he begins, blond bangs falling in front of his right eye, "Midoriya! Heard you've been in some trouble recently, is that right?"

Izuku blinks, wondering which incident he's referring to. There are a lot of things he's recently done that could be floating around school. Sometimes he forgets he's also the representative for all first years at the school, not just the ones in the hero course. It always comes as a surprise when people point at him in the halls.

Uraraka speaks first, annoyed. "Can't you gossip somewhere else, Monoma?" She pushes Izuku's shoulder, trying to guide him away and back towards class. They have Ectoplasm's lecture next, and he's not always lenient with tardiness.

"What's with the hostility? We just want to know if it's true or not," Monoma dismisses, moving smoothly back in front of them—almost bumping right into Uraraka. In fact, if she hadn't jerked herself back, he *would've.*

The blond boy corrals her, trying to separate her more from Izuku, almost, and that's what prompts Izuku to move. With one forceful shove of his hand, Monoma goes stumbling back into a group of

second years before falling on his ass.

The commotion causes a sudden hush to fall across the sea of students, and all eyes turn to the trio. Izuku can hear the blood pounding in his ears now, and heat rushes to his cheeks.

He straightens up. Okay, so *maybe* that was an overreaction.

Monoma laughs and gets to his feet, unbothered. “Doesn’t take much to get you angry anymore, does it?”

“Deku.” Uraraka grabs his hand in hers and pulls him backwards so they can just go the long way to class, but a dense crowd has gathered now, blocking them in. She must figure it would be hell to have to fight all the way through, as she huffs in irritation. “Come on, I can float us above.”

Izuku doesn’t want to be stared at the entire time from below, so he instead looks up at Uraraka’s ascending form and smiles a little. “You wanna go through the vents?” He asks, trying his hardest not to pay any mind to the growing murmurs around them. “They’re bigger in this wing, so you won’t get claustrophobic.”

Uraraka nods, expression turning brighter, and she extends her hand for Izuku to take even though she probably knows he doesn’t exactly need Zero Gravity to reach the hatch. “Sure!”

“You’re not going to talk to me, Midoriya?” Monoma jeers, evading his friends’ attempts to call him off with practiced ease. “After that shove, you at least owe me an explanation. I swear, it seems everyone in Class 1-A really does have an ego too big for—”

“Knock it off!” Uraraka shoots back. “You’re one to talk.”

At the same time, Kendou appears from behind Monoma and raises a large hand to shut her classmate up—thankfully. Izuku locks his fingers with Uraraka, preparing to kick off gently from the floor with the help of her quirk and leave the situation so he can continue his anxious planning.

But Monoma does the unthinkable.

“What, you can’t speak for yourself?” He baits, just barely missing Kendou’s warning hit. “Where’s the Midoriya I knew from the Sports Festival, huh?”

Monoma reaches out, and there it is again: that blaring siren in Izuku's brain. That *warning.*

His skull splits apart, and danger bounces off the corners of his vision, but by the time he's made sense of what his body is trying to warn him of, it's too late. Monoma places his hand on Izuku's exposed forearm—his bad side, on his tingling arm. The contact is brief, because Izuku jerks his body away immediately, but it's enough. Izuku's nerves explode, and Extract sends out an alarm of its own too amidst all the internal screeching, and right then, Izuku feels a *spike* in Monoma's quirk, an uptick in energy usage.

And Izuku knows exactly what he just did.

Now, Izuku has always been somewhat wary around Monoma. Not because he feared his taunts or his jabs, of course not. He was never even really bothered by Copy itself—rather, he always feared what Monoma might do *accidentally* in the event that he copied Izuku's 'quirk' for fun.

Because he wouldn't get One for All due to its stockpiling nature and *oceans* of required, inherent energy. It would, in a sense, just be a dud.

But it's possible he would get something much, much worse.

The fear that grips Izuku is similar in essence to what his younger self must have felt in the moments before All Might wrenched him from the unforgiving depths of that water. There are around a hundred students in this portion of the hallway alone, so what are the chances that Monoma happened to copy the *one* quirk Izuku wouldn't want him to?

And worse—what would happen if he actually used it unknowingly?

Ten minutes. Monoma can copy a quirk for ten minutes. On top of that, he can copy at least *four* at the same time. What if he copied more than just one of Izuku's quirks? Is that a possibility for Copy?

I need you dead, Izuku thinks to himself, his body cold all over at the realization. *Monoma, I need you dead for ten minutes.*

Izuku doesn't know how exactly it happens. But all he knows is that he has no more thoughts in his mind when he does it. He turns, eyes wide and glittering, pivoting on his heel, his palm sliding out of Uraraka's hand and leaving her floating in the air.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees his father's vestige reflected in the glass windows behind the throng of students, mimicking his exact movements, his wispy eyes narrowed in encouragement.

And that's all he needs.

Red lightning cracks around his shadowed form, and Izuku punches Monoma Keito square in the face.

Izuku sits in the meeting room adjacent to the principal's office.

It's a small, ten by ten feet area, with a desk in the middle and multiple chairs placed in different corners. Izuku is in one of them, leaning his head against the wall with his eyes closed.

His knuckles are burning with the effort it's taking Boost to heal up the bruises.

In the room over, both of Monoma's parents are talking with Principal Nezu. His office is soundproofed now, so Izuku can't hear the conversation, but he's sure Nezu is soothing things over like how he always tries to do.

Izuku wonders what's in store for him this time.

The door to the hallway opens, and it's not Shouta, like Izuku was hoping—it's Kan. The Blood Hero is fuming, and his jaw is set.

"If the weed didn't get you expelled," he snaps, his burly arms flexing, "what makes you think this would? And I warned you to stay away from my students!"

"I didn't do it to get expelled," Izuku states simply.

All at once, Kan notices his position and current attitude—the way he's curled inwards on himself, his gaze on the floor, his tone shaky with nerves yet somehow even—and tips his head back. "Then why?" He bites.

Izuku lifts a shoulder. "I felt him copy my quirk." He smudges his shoe

against the polished tile. “I didn’t know a quicker way to make sure he wouldn’t try it out, because I knew he wouldn’t listen to me if I just asked him not to use it.”

When Kan just stares, open-mouthed, Izuku shifts uncomfortably and drags his gaze up to look at him. He can pretty much see the way the puzzle pieces fall into place in Kan’s brain.

“I would’ve called for you if I had time. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt him that bad.”

Kan is silent for a few more moments, and then he storms into Nezu’s office without another glance Izuku’s way.

That went well, right? Izuku asks, but he gets no response from One for All, which has been the pattern for weeks now.

His father responds, though—something he’s had to get used to. *He respects you more now. You’ve done something well in his mind.*

Izuku sighs to himself. “It’s less respecting me and more tolerating me, I think. He has no reason to respect me.”

He assumed you both had a petty squabble. You knocked him out to protect others, so that changes things for him.

“Does that really matter?” Izuku wonders aloud. He lifts his head to stare at the ceiling. There are no vents in this room. The walls are fortified. Izuku finds it almost funny that Nezu had this room made not too long ago, as if he was preparing for events such as this.

Movement catches Izuku’s eye, and in the opposite corner of the room, the shadows twist and turn to form some unholy replica of All for One. The body, though wispy, is an accurate representation of the man’s sheer size.

“It shouldn’t matter,” the vestige agrees. *“There’s a reason he was surprised. How would it be your fault if his student managed to steal some poor child’s quirk using yours?”*

Izuku stares, skin prickling as he forces his expression to remain neutral. “I had the power to stop it before it happened, so it was my responsibility.”

“Would it really have affected you in any way that matters if you only let it be?”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly in the mood to reveal my quirk to everyone at school today, for one.”

The shadows turn bright, and All for One is enveloped in all white. He wreaths around Izuku, making the boy cold. *“And if they knew? What then?”* His voice is silky smooth. *“What could they possibly do in retaliation?”*

Izuku’s gut churns, and he squeezes his eyes shut. He forces All for One away, blocking him from his mind, and when he reopens them, he has the room to himself again.

Sometimes, like now, he slips up. Sometimes he forgets that the vestige he’s been talking to for the past couple of weeks now is still a direct extension of his father. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he forgets on purpose because it’s easy. Because he wants to.

But every now and then, the vestige reminds him who he is.

When Kan comes back in, he seems calmer, but his face is still stern—a clear warning to behave. “You’re lucky they’re not pressing charges,” he says. “Now go apologize. And *mean it.”*

He pushes Izuku’s head forward when he gets close, leading him through the doorway to Nezu’s office. And now, standing before Monoma’s parents, Izuku’s mouth dries up.

Mr. Monoma looks nothing like his son. He has darker hair, and he has a dark goatee. Glasses rest on a prominent nose, accentuating the irritated expression he’s wearing. Mrs. Monoma, in contrast, seems to be an exact replica of Izuku’s schoolmate. She has beautiful blond hair that falls down to her chin, and her sharp jawline gives the impression she’s not one to joke around.

Izuku keeps his gaze downcast when he comes to a halt before them.

“This is Midoriya Izuku,” Nezu says, gesturing with his paw. His tone is careful. “Normally, we wouldn’t let parents meet the other party, but circumstances are different here since your son doesn’t wish to prosecute.”

The mammal looks at Izuku then, as if to prompt him, and Izuku wishes he could be anywhere else but in this room in front of the very rat who made his life so much more complicated just a week or so ago. But this isn’t about Principal Nezu right now, and Izuku has something to do, so he can ignore him entirely.

He bows low at the waist, hands by his side. At the corner of his vision, he notices that Monoma—who is sporting a rather large bandage on his nose—isn't looking at him.

"I apologize for hitting you," Izuku says, eyes closed. "My emotions got the better of me. It was inappropriate, and you didn't deserve it. It won't happen again."

Monoma doesn't say a word in response, though Izuku can sense a myriad of emotions bubbling beneath his skin—namely regret.

Mrs. Monoma nods appreciatively at this, smiling down at Izuku a little when the boy straightens up. Mr. Monoma, however, doesn't seem as willing to let it go. He seems rather *furious,* actually.

He fixes Izuku with a fiery glare for a few more moments before turning to look at Nezu. "Where are his parents? I'd like to talk with them to see what they're going to do about this."

The stagnant silence that fills the office nearly makes Izuku want to laugh out loud. He shifts on his feet, and this time he *does* look at the Principal, wondering what he's going to say in response.

Nezu's beady eyes flick over to Izuku, who doesn't say a word. After a moment, Nezu clears his throat. "Midoriya here is a ward of the state," he begins with a slight edge to his words, "so I fear that won't be possible at this time."

Oh, Izuku thinks. *Well, that's one way to put it.*

Monoma's head snaps to look his way, finally. His lips are slightly parted, and his eyes aren't as narrow. Izuku can't bring himself to look at him for too long.

"You let kids like that be students at this school?" Mr. Monoma asks, and the venom in his tone catches Izuku off guard. He blinks, a strange feeling settling in his stomach. It must come off funny to Kan too, as the hero shifts closer to Izuku's side, though still making sure to not touch him.

Mrs. Monoma gives her husband a glare and elbows him, taken aback. The man only rolls his eyes after her rebuke and continues stiffly.

"Well, then I want to speak with whoever is his current guardian, because this is unacceptable. Just because my son doesn't want there to be consequences for him doesn't mean I—"

“It’s fine,” Monoma cuts in brashly. He pushes his bangs back. “I deserved it, anyhow. I knew what would happen if I kept pushing him like that.” He smiles a little, giving a shrug. “I’m only surprised he didn’t do it sooner.”

Izuku meets his schoolmate’s gaze again with pleasant surprise crossing over his features. *Does he actually mean that?*

Nezu rests his paws together and takes back control of the room. “Regardless of any provocation, I assure you that we don’t condone the kind of behavior exhibited today. As homeroom teacher, Aizawa-sensei holds the authority over Midoriya while at school, just as Kan-sensei does over your son.” Nezu gestures with a paw to the blood hero. “Any external disciplinary action you wish to bring up can be discussed through either of them.”

At the mention of Aizawa, Izuku inwardly sighs. Upon searching for him using Extract, Izuku finds that he’s still off campus at the moment, which is likely why Kan is the only one who showed up. Great. This is just another thing for Aizawa to put on his record.

Izuku is made to wait outside in the hallway, and he stares at his feet the entire time. Occasionally, students walk past him and snicker in a childish manner, but he ignores them. It’s only funny from an outsider’s perspective.

Mrs. and Mrs. Monoma are the next to leave the principal’s office. He feels their quiet quirks brush past him, leaving residue in their wake, and Mrs. Monoma is the only one to look at him. She winks, giving an almost approving nod, and continues with her husband.

Huh. Guess she thinks her son deserved it too.

It’s a while later when Vlad King and Monoma follow after. Izuku is told to get up, so he does, and Kan looks both of them in the eye after making them stand side by side.

“This won’t happen again or else you both will be scrubbing the floors every day after school until you’re finished with the *entire* building, is that clear?”

Monoma folds his arms and leans against the wall with a smirk. “Does that include the outside gyms?”

Kan jabs a finger in front of him. “I will make you mop up the football field-sized swimming pool, kid, *don’t get smart.”*

After promising to not get into another altercation or even so much as a small argument, Kan storms back to his office—but not without making sure Izuku knows that Aizawa will be informed. Not that Izuku had any doubts about that, obviously.

Izuku stays in his spot for a moment, his temples pounding, and he's surprised when Monoma doesn't move yet either. He thought the boy would've made one last remark before following after his homeroom teacher, but he's still beside Izuku.

When Izuku's chest may just cave in due to the pressure, Monoma examines him fully. "I am sorry, you know," the blond says, making Izuku start. "Not for what I said—that's all still relevant. But, Sensei told me why you knocked me out."

Izuku's hair raises, but Monoma just throws up a hand.

"I'm not going to ask for specifics on why it was so important to you; the bottom line is, I shouldn't have tried to copy your quirk. I guess it's invasive for some people." Monoma's hand finds his chin. "And dangerous."

Before Izuku can come up with what to say in response, Monoma stretches out a hand, holding it out between them. He has no gloves on, not that Izuku thought he would. But here, the boy is able to see the very faint burn marks on the inner edges of Monoma's palm—a side effect of copying a quirk.

Or maybe many quirks.

Izuku peers back up at him, and it's now that he can sense his schoolmate's emotions finally leaking through without any resistance: exhaustion, hesitance, and—above all—anxiety.

Monoma may be smiling wide, and his eyes may be bright with a thinly hidden challenge, but there's no mistaking the tightness at the corners of his expression. His muscles are tight, his shoulders squared. He's the pinnacle of nerves.

Izuku slowly, and with great care, takes Monoma's hand and allows the other boy to shake it. His skin is weirdly warm, almost staticky. But there is no sweat present like there is on Kacchan's hands, nor are there calluses or other raised bumps like on Shouto's and Uraraka's.

He is just Monoma, and this time, Izuku doesn't feel any spike in energy from Copy.

Izuku tips his head forward just a little, and Monoma laughs, withdrawing.

“You could stand to talk a little more,” Monoma advises, shaking his head ruefully. “Where’s the guy from when we first met? You’re our representative, so you have to be louder. Not just for us, but for yourself.” He shoulder-checks Izuku when he walks past, but it’s not harsh at all. “When I come at you again in the future, you better be ready.”

Watching Monoma walk away, his chin held high despite the redness around his eyes and the bandage on his bruised nose, Izuku isn’t sure what to think.

But his gut is still churning, his hairs still raised.

Why does everything feel so much easier for Izuku all of a sudden? Before, he despised Monoma for the way he provoked the class even after they faced mortal danger. Before, he promised himself he would die first before telling other people, especially heroes, about the things he used to do back when he was a child living alone or with his father. Before, he thought he would for sure be locked away in some dark, underground facility without a name to remember himself by after being discovered for who he is.

Today, though, none of these things have held up.

He does not feel any hatred towards Monoma. Rather, the emotion bubbling inside his chest right now is a softer reflection of him. Izuku also does not hesitate as much as he should when admitting something to Hound Dog or Aizawa.

Today, Izuku is in the hallways of UA, standing outside the office of Principal Nezu, and he is as free as he can be at the moment.

It all feels so easy, so unreal, that Izuku still can’t form any words for Monoma. He watches the blond leave, his hand tingling.

His mind feels staticky like the way Monoma’s touch on him felt, and he can only breathe in shallowly, so he sits in his little nest inside the vents, waiting for the bell to ring. He is suspended for the rest of the day, which isn’t too bad, he supposes.

It’s just enough time for him to sort out his thoughts and avoid Yagi’s return.

Later that evening, Hizashi has to take the car to the radio station for another long night of working and recording. So, Izuku is made to walk beside Shouta the whole way to the apartment, which he doesn't mind. It's comforting.

On the way there, he asks his teacher, "Can I still patrol tonight?"

Shouta gives him an unimpressed stare. "You really need me to answer that?"

Izuku only looks at the sidewalk beneath them, not going to argue. Shouta snorts at his reaction and knocks his shoulder.

"Hey," he promises, "tomorrow."

Izuku puts his hands in his pockets and leans against his mentor, the cold getting to him despite his enhanced metabolism. "What would you have done if you were in my shoes?"

"If I didn't have Erasure?" At Izuku's nod, Shouta makes a thoughtful noise. "Well, I guess I would've had to knock him out, too, just in case."

"So, I didn't do anything wrong?"

"There are other less painful ways of knocking someone out," Shouta reminds with a humorous edge to his words, "but no, I wouldn't say you did anything wrong."

Izuku's nose wrinkles. "So why am I not allowed to patrol tonight?"

"You need a night off. This is a good excuse to rest some. Besides, you need to finish that project for Ectoplasm."

"How do you know about that?"

Shouta shrugs mysteriously, and Izuku rolls his eyes.

"I don't need to rest," he adds quietly, to which Shouta huffs in disbelief.

"You've been working hard for a week straight. Don't think I don't see you on your phone during class, too. The Club can wait a few minutes sometimes."

"Overhaul can't wait anymore."

Shouta pushes Izuku in front of him so he can enter the apartment complex first. “We’re working on that, kid. Believe me.”

Izuku doesn’t like the delay, as little as it is, but he has to deal with it. Shouta has never steered him wrong before.

In the days after his little brother tried to kill himself, Tomura remembers being unable to stop shaking.

It was pure chance, really, that he ended up in the doctor’s laboratory that day. He wasn’t told to go in there. He didn’t have an assignment or an order from All for One. He arrived home in the facility, and no one else was around in his part of the wing. His footsteps echoed down the white hallways as he walked to nowhere.

Usually, he would go to his room and play games or listen to whatever shitty music is on the radio. But that day, his body spoke for him. He found himself in front of Garaki Kyudai’s small portion of Master’s old facility. It wasn’t really small, but in relation to the entire estate it was.

Regardless, Tomura couldn’t breathe from the stillness in that wing. He opened those heavy double doors like it was something he did all the time, and it’s a good thing he did. He walked in, and the time it took for him to get his brother out of that death machine was entirely too long for him.

Because when he finally had Izuku in his arms, slippery and warm and covered in cuts from the glass Tomura destroyed, the boy had no pulse. Izuku’s chest wasn’t rising. His body was limp—entirely motionless. Water and blood mixed together as it dripped from his nose and the tiny space between his blue lips. Tomura didn’t know what to do then. He was never made to come in here as often as Izuku was. The vials sitting all around him—he had no clue what they were for.

He knew some must’ve been for the healing Garaki had to force upon his subjects sometimes to keep them alive, but he just didn’t know which ones they were. And he hated the fact that he never thought to ask Izuku or pay attention whenever he used to talk about all the different drugs in that room.

If Tomura had listened, would it have been any easier?

With nothing else to do, as no help would come their way for a while yet, Tomura beat on his brother with his palms, stimulating the flow of his air and pumping the blood for him.

He didn't show any signs of waking up until a minute in, and when his chest fluttered with life, Tomura just clutched him tight, shaking so badly he couldn't see straight. But he felt his brother's heartbeat, faint yet steady. Izuku's breathing was labored, but the rise and fall meant air was getting through, and that's what mattered.

And with his relief came blistering anger. He yelled so loudly and with so much force that his throat gave out midway from the strain, but that didn't stop him. He shouted some more, hoarse words reverberating off the walls, and all the while, Izuku struggled to live long enough to hear it.

His brother couldn't answer, as the water in his lungs fucked his throat up, bringing with it more bloody tissue, and that only hurt worse.

And Tomura will never get that image out of his head: Izuku stuck to the bottom of the tank, tiny bubbles racing each other to break the surface.

It was a vision of clear death, and, God, Tomura didn't think he would ever see anything so terrifying.

When All for One came home, he took Izuku, and Tomura didn't see him for a while after. It could easily have been two weeks before he did next, or likely much, much longer. Tomura was walking the halls aimlessly again, trembling beneath his hoodie, when he saw him.

Izuku was scarred and bruised with new lesions around his dark eyes. Tomura knew Master must have given Izuku one of those quirk blocking injections to staunt his regeneration. It's something he always did to reel him and Tomura back when they were being defiant.

"I'm sorry," Izuku began first, and his voice was raw and scratchy from having drowned. *"I didn't mean for you to be the one to find me. I didn't mean to scare you."*

The words were funny. They made Tomura's eyes widen a little. *Sorry?* He was sorry for getting caught in the act of doing it? But not

sorry for actually attempting it?

Tomura grit his teeth then, that ferocious anger returning. Was he really sorry? If so, he should've been sorry for leaving his dirty shoes and socks neatly arranged by the ladder leading up to the tank. He should've been sorry that he cleaned his room and the kitchen and all the common areas, making everything spotless and erasing any hint of his presence, all so he could die politely and make it easier for Kurogiri. He should've been sorry that all Tomura could see when he opened the door was the tank turning pink with blood. He should've been sorry that Tomura stepped in, confused at first, his body torn between instinct and common sense, his heart frozen against his ribs.

Izuku should've been fucking sorry that he didn't even say goodbye to Tomura before committing to it.

But Tomura couldn't voice those things. He just clenched his gloved hands, his anger all consuming. *"Why?"* He demanded.

"Why what?"

Tomura lurched forward and grabbed Izuku's shirt, yanking him up off the ground. He was so light that it physically made Tomura feel ill. Izuku always felt lighter after a punishment. *"You know what!"*

Why did you kill yourself, Izuku? That's what you did, right? I know you did. You aren't stupid enough to make a mistake like that without planning it first.

Izuku gazed at him for a few moments longer, eyes dull and dark. He was not crying; Tomura hadn't seen him cry in years. *"Just look around,"* Izuku whispered, *"what more do you want me to say?"*

Tomura didn't utter a word, eyes flicking back and forth wildly between Izuku's.

His little brother looked away first, just as he always did. *"I promise I won't do that to you again."*

Tomura dropped him, and he only grew angrier when Izuku landed in a heap before him. *"Move!"* He barked, kicking past him, trembling still.

He hasn't stopped trembling since that day.

The thing is, Izuku was dead when he arrived. Had been for at least a

minute, it seemed. Tomura never told anyone that part. He never told anyone how he fought to keep him breathing until someone, *anyone* could come home to tell him what to do to fix his stupid little brother's mistake.

Tomura thought he was numb to death by then. Izuku turned out to be the exception. They have shared time together, and that must be why. But if that's true, Tomura isn't sure why Master wants him to kill the woman he has only ever spoken fondly of around him.

Izuku's mother is a pleasant woman, apparently, and she didn't exactly get in All for One's way back then, so what changed? Tomura doesn't understand it even now. Master adores her. He loves her, he said. So, in a way, Tomura finds it sickening that he would kill her now even when he claims to love her still.

It's the way things are, Tomura supposes. It is not so concerning to him that he will disobey his orders. Not at all.

He just wishes he could understand a little more. Is this how he's supposed to feel about his traitorous brother? Should he be able to… *think* of him regretfully sometimes without any guilt whilst still standing firm on his plan to execute him?

When Tomura has him in his hold, ready to end it, will he feel the same way he did the day Izuku killed himself? Would he go through with it anyway?

Would All for One have this issue? Does his wife not mean the same to him as Izuku does?

Tomura shouldn't care about these things. Most times, he doesn't. This is just a rare bad day. He will continue training and working towards his goals. He will work begrudgingly with the few villains he was told to recruit. He will also kill even when the situation doesn't call for it. That's his promise.

Master told him it should be familiar to him, and it is.

He wishes he knew why.

All Might manages to approach Izuku the next day, and it starts off awkward but progresses even worse.

Izuku doesn't know what exactly makes the glass in his mind tip over, but one thing leads to the next, and his irritation takes hold of him in sharp claws. He snaps, turning on All Might with his blood boiling, and calls the man full of himself—even though anyone with a brain knows Yagi is anything but.

It's not even like the hero was provoking him or anything. He was just making conversation and telling him about his trip, assuring Izuku that things went alright, just as he promised! But today his father has been loud in his ears, and it doesn't help that Izuku is extremely nervous about his patrol tonight—these two things, coupled with his warring emotions and imbalanced hormones caused by the medicine he's taking, makes him short-fused.

Shocked by his own actions, Izuku freezes, not believing the nasty words came from him at first. Unable to offer any meaningful apology, he retreats.

Kayama-sensei witnesses the whole thing, though, and follows him soon after. Which is how Izuku finds himself in the abandoned radio wing on campus, still sitting in that cracked leather rolling chair by the time the pro hero comes inside.

Her quirk, powerful and flowery and sweet, invades his senses and calms his nerves even without activating, and Izuku allows it. He doesn't look at her when she sits beside him and spins around in her newly claimed chair.

Izuku is far too ashamed to do anything but stare at the keyboards in front of him.

Kayama leans back, her long, dark purple hair falling in cascading waves down the back of the chair, nearly touching the floor. She stays silent, seemingly set on not speaking first. Nothing happens, and it will keep not happening forever until Izuku decides to speak up. He has no choice but to do so.

"I know I'm acting like a coward," Izuku says, bringing his knees to his chest and resting his chin on his arms. "I don't know why I said what I did."

“He’s not mad.”

“He has to be by now. This isn’t the first time I’ve done that to him. It’s unfair.”

Kayama stops her spinning and surveys him through her glasses. “Ya know, he cares for you a lot. Words can hurt, sure, but nothing you say could make All Might stop caring. He has a lot of love to give.”

Love. Does All Might care that much about him? Enough for it to count as love? Kayama uses the word love to describe just about any relationship she notices, but in this instance she sounds different. Like she truly sees it this way.

A burning lump forges in Izuku’s throat. He doesn’t like this. Even if All Might loves him, Izuku is not a good son or successor. It would be love born in vain.

And if it really is love, Izuku feels even worse. Here he is, treating All Might like shit yet again, and the man only cares more and more in return. It’s ironic, really, how Izuku never used to trust heroes at all but would count All Might as the outstanding exception, but now trusts nearly all heroes yet pushes aside his idol.

Shouta said he can find a way to distance himself from Yagi whilst still keeping their connection strong, but how is that possible? Izuku should’ve asked for clarifications.

He wishes he can be forgiven by the universe for not understanding the love he receives from the people around him. Their soft touches are a revelation to him, their gentle tone unfamiliar. He cannot breathe when his friends whisper something quiet and warm in his ear, and he cannot make sense of the bubbling feelings of contentment in the air all around him now. The warmth tingeing their emotions makes him stop and think for minutes after he feels them.

It just doesn’t make sense to him.

They have to know he isn’t meant for that kind of—of *love,* right? Everyone who has ever loved him has done so angrily. His mother was the first, with her wild eyes and shattered mind. His father came next, his reassuring pats on Izuku's back and shoulders causing bruises the next day. His brother and his scoffs and elbows to Izuku’s side whenever the boy got in the way of his gaming is a prime example of this. And Kacchan, too, of course, with his fiery heat and explosive words that would leave starbursts on freckled skin.

Izuku doesn't understand love if it does not hurt him in the way a rose thorn does when it pricks a grateful palm. Unless the love is given with red-rimmed eyes and shaking fists, Izuku will not know it.

"It would be better if he stopped trying," Izuku says feebly.

"When has All Might ever given up?" When Izuku cannot muster a reply, Kayama kicks her feet up on the desk. "I understand you don't want to tell him about your real quirk yet, but he is your teacher, and he will only keep pushing until you confide in him. As your mentor, that's his job."

"But what if I keep hanging around him and confiding in him, and—and something slips?"

Kayama straightens up to look at him fully. "Honey, sometimes the road we take to avoid bad situations ends up being the worst trail anyway. You just have to choose which path you want to bet on, and then go from there."

Izuku is notoriously unlucky, though he does like betting. He accepts her words graciously, and he is even more relieved when she reveals she isn't going to tell Shouta or Hizashi about his outburst, as it's a matter between him and All Might. Izuku is in the clear there.

He does, however, have to apologize to Yagi soon. Preferably tomorrow morning, immediately after coming to school. He could text or call anytime, of course, but it's not the same. It's arguably even more disrespectful. In order to come up with a full explanation and a meaningful apology, Izuku needs a few hours to prepare for a face-to-face conversation.

He does exactly that later that night while waiting for Hawks to fly by his location.

Hizashi is working overtime, and Shouta was called on a last minute, urgent mission somewhere in the neighboring city, much to his displeasure. So, Izuku is alone for patrol.

Why does he feel this vulnerable? When did he ever start getting used to one of them tagging along?

Izuku stands on the edge of a high skyscraper, arms crossed as the tips of his boots hang over the side. Wind teases his hair and pushes him gently forward and back; it's a little game between the two of them. Danger Sense buzzes quietly in his mind from time to time, but he is

an expert on toeing deadly lines of gunpowder. He will be fine.

Takami Keigo is a fast flier. Izuku tracks him with Extract but nearly loses him due to the sheer speed he travels at above the clouds. But the wind he causes is enough to warn Izuku a few moments before he touches down.

Izuku never called for him. He never told Hawks he would be here. But the number three pro hero has something of a sixth sense—and also one deadly pair of sharp eyes; he probably noticed Izuku on that rooftop from miles away.

“Gotta say,” the man starts suavely, pushing back his hair as he steps toward Izuku, “I didn’t expect you to reach a decision this soon.”

Izuku gestures to the busy city below. “Circumstances change.”

“What’s got you so desperate all of a sudden?” Hawks’ wings twitch when he folds them behind himself. “Never thought you’d ask Endeavor for the signature.”

Izuku isn’t surprised that Endeavor went to Hawks for a confrontation, as he did tell him that Hawks knew his identity first. He hopes the flame hero tore him a new one even if it may not be deserved.

“Asking All Might would’ve been overkill,” Izuku deflects dryly. Without any more chit-chat, he pulls out the stack of papers from his backpack and uses Black Whip to hand it to Hawks. “If you can’t tell, I made some additions. You should look over it.”

Hawks quirks a brow. “I'm no lawyer. I can’t accept anything that hasn’t been approved by—”

“I’m only asking for full immunity for the Underground Club. If I sign this deal, I’ll end up becoming the Club representative for your Commission. But this contract didn’t include any specifications regarding my members.”

“What more needs to be said for them?”

Izuku stops himself from rolling his eyes. “For each and every person associated with the Club, including those who are retired, I need the forgiveness of their crimes up until this point, as before we were never governmentally aligned. Every heroic act we did prior to now is still considered a felony. Tonight, if you accept, the Commission and the Club will become allies, with the Club being officially recognized as

an independent, *legal,* and private company. But for that to happen, my members need to be pardoned of any past crimes committed during their efforts to protect Japan—any crime within reason, of course. If you check section eight, I've listed everything out in more detail."

Hawks turns to the pages he's referring to. "I would've thought all this was already implied."

"For their safety, I can't do inferences. That leaves things open for misinterpretation."

Hawks looks up, his golden gaze searching for something on Izuku's masked face. Finally, his shoulders go up. "If this is the only addition you've proposed, I don't see why it wouldn't pass through legal. I can get back to you with their response by morning at the latest."

Izuku holds up a hand. "There is one more thing."

The hero pauses, wings fluffing out. His gloved hands are holding the contract carefully. "Is it about your salary?" He teases.

"I need help defeating the Yakuza leader."

The lighthearted expression on Hawks' face falls so fast that any other time Izuku would've laughed out loud. The blond's eyes turn dark, and his lip curls up in slight annoyance. "Jesus, kid."

"My clients tell me your Commission is already planning a raid, but only if things get worse—and even then, you won't be ready to do anything for months at least. That's way too much of a delay for me."

Hawks' impatience finally makes an appearance. "You want the Commission to aid you in killing Overhaul?"

"I want the Commission to help in saving a little girl from being harvested for drugs. Do *quirk-erasing* bullets ring a bell?" Izuku's teeth are gritted now. His boots crunch against gravel as he walks closer to Hawks. "The longer we sit and wait, the more powerful Overhaul becomes and the more control he extends over society through the underground. That girl and many others will only be in more danger."

"Now, hold on. There is a reason we haven't rushed to do anything yet." Hawks' words are nearly hissed. "The Yakuza is a recognized body. We have important ties with them that reinforce the balance we

have now, so we need to approach everything with—"

"The Hero's Commission had agreements with the previous leader, *not* Overhaul. He is a usurper, and other major branches of the Yakuza agree."

"Which is why the Commission is planning the raid in the first place. But, kid, not even I can convince them of expediting their plans just to join you in yours."

Izuku turns around, Black Whip easily taking back the stack of papers he gave to Hawks. "Then you're of no use to me, and neither is the Commission."

This isn't surprising news to Izuku. The declaration was expected, however disappointing to hear. Izuku is going to do everything he can to stop Overhaul as soon as possible—with or without the aid of the government.

He is sick of fucking waiting. When he was first tasked with this mission by the Board, he was forbidden from doing a damn thing about it. He wasn't allowed to take any action. But now that he *is* the stand-in for the entirety of the Board, he doesn't need permission anymore. He authorized *himself*.

But since then, what does he have to show for that shift in power? What has he done that has helped that girl?

Nothing.

He steps up onto the ledge, feeling the cool breeze whip around him as black tendrils shoot from his back, ready to bring him down safely. Hawks' irritation hits him like a truck, and the winged hero is floating in front of him in an instant, pointing a finger in his face.

"Wait," he snaps, seemingly done with this entire ordeal. He forces Izuku back onto the center of the roof, and Izuku gets a feeling the man will be in for some trouble if he leaves here tonight without that contract.

"Those are my two requests, and I'm standing firm on them," Izuku tells him. "I'm not going to—"

"I don't care about the first thing. They can get that shit figured out if they want you badly enough," Hawks says with a flick of his hand. "Now for the raid, I can't promise anything, I *can't,* but I *can* put it in

as a request. That's about all I can do for you." Hawks' wings shudder as he gesticulates more. "There's a chance they'll do it, or at least provide some kind of resource—legal immunity for you and anyone involved depending on the outcome, for example—but you have to understand that it's slim."

Izuku pauses. "But it's a chance?"

"Yes. It's a chance."

The boy looks down. "I guess that'll have to be good enough. But I have to warn you now: I'm going whether it's approved or not. That girl can't wait any longer."

Hawks smiles, and it's all teeth. "I wouldn't expect any less of you, bun bun. But, if I can give you some advice?" He leans forward a little. "The Nighteye agency may provide you with more help than the Commission can. They are the source for most of our info on the manufactured drugs. They're only working slowly because they're awaiting the Commission's approval to move to the next phase—something you're obviously not going to do."

Izuku gives him the contract and makes sure to mask his expression. "I was headed there next, but thank you."

At this, Izuku makes to walk away again, as he intends to make another trip to the Club before his patrol has to end, but Hawks' neutral words stop in his tracks.

"You know, Endeavor also told me about that villain you mentioned."

Izuku doesn't look back. "Did he?"

"Said he's some kind of supervillain—All Might level, even. And that he's come back from the dead."

"He was never dead in the first place."

"Is that why you're as strong as you are?" Hawks asks, curious and neutral with not an ounce of aggression or annoyance. "Because you grew up around a villain like All for One?"

The question is odd to Izuku, but not because of the casual name drop; Izuku figures Hawk was made to study the classified files of All for One during his time at the Commission. But why, out of anything Hawks could ask, would he go for that? The winged hero is quiet and

still in the shadows, his golden eyes the only thing Izuku can clearly see. Despite this, there is an air of desperation looming over Hawks' head. He is searching for something, but not in Izuku—in himself.

Izuku turns his head. "Is that a compliment?"

"Do you want it to be?" Hawks shoots back without hesitation, and Izuku for once is pushed into silence.

Did my father make me strong? Is he responsible for everything I am? Is that something I have to recognize?

Or maybe Izuku is looking at Hawks' question wrong. Maybe Hawks is saying that he recognizes Izuku has had to train himself to be stronger so he could get away from such a monster of a human being. Maybe he isn't giving the credit to All for One—maybe he's actually recognizing it as something Izuku did by himself.

Does Izuku even recognize that?

Instead of answering any of these questions, Izuku faces Hawks fully once again and moves his mask to the side. "I can't let anyone else get hurt. All Might is the strongest, and he's the best hero this world has ever seen, but All for One is just… he's different. And I don't want—no, I *can't* let my master get hurt again, even if he still wins in the end. So, I… I have to ask you." Izuku warms his hands by putting them near his mouth. White clouds dissipate against black gloves, and he fixes Hawks—someone he used to be unequivocally terrified of and maybe still sort of is—with a sad sort of look. "You'll be there, right? You'll come if we need you?"

For a long moment, Hawks only stares. He lets out a long, soft sigh, and the breeze carries it away between them. "I'm not a power type by any means, kid, but I would never pass up the chance to fight if it meant someone out there will live because of it."

"So, if I—if *we* call you, and we need to discuss some plans or—or information about—about him…"

"I wouldn't miss it," Hawks says with a bright grin. "You know me, Rabbit. I just can't help myself when people need protecting."

There is no deception in his voice, and the warmth flooding from his body makes Izuku shiver. He nods once, then twice, before dipping his head in farewell. "Thank you."

“I’ll tell you when the contract is finalized and if the Commission will extend a hand to you for the raid. Stay alive until then.” Hawks gives a dramatic bow in return, one wing folding beneath him. “I’ll keep looking out for you during patrols, but in the meantime, I’d keep that mask on if I were you.”

Izuku rolls his eyes and replaces his mask. “Goodnight, Hawks.”

“Jump high,” the man says before taking flight—a good natured farewell.

When Izuku leaves the building, his body feels weirdly light. Like something has been lifted. He heads for the Club, thinking of their conversation over and over again. It’s pretty clear Hawks has already established the ‘supervillain’ as being much more than just some guy Izuku grew up around—he no doubt has sensed the more familial bonds. But he didn’t seem to care much, and Izuku is glad.

That’s one less thing to worry about.

His next stop tomorrow morning will be the one person who may just hate him more than his worst enemies: Sir Nighteye.

Izuku should see All Might before then.

“You still don’t trust him,” Nana says, and it’s not a question, really. She says it grimly, biting back the accusation she so desperately feels it to be.

“It’s not that I don’t trust him,” Yoichi replies simply. “I do not trust All for One.”

“What do you mean?”

“The darkness. It pulls at him, Nana. It calls to him with each breath he takes.”

Nana leans forward, her palms resting on her thighs as she peers at the first user of One for All. “You hear the voices, too. Why are you so worried?”

“I have had years to practice defending myself against my brother’s tricks, whereas Ninth has not. He is being tempted each time he comes here, and we have all seen that it is getting harder and harder for him to control himself. I can sense his turmoil even while he’s awake.”

Nana’s lips press into a thin line. “You fear he’ll be consumed by it. You think he’ll give in.”

Yoichi tips his head, still focusing on the memories they’re watching together. “There is only so much we can do for him. We are guiding him on the path we think is right, but he is bound to stray. We must continue to watch him and not be fooled by the progress he lets us see.”

Nana bites back the words she wants to say, the argument that she has had building up in her mind for so long, and accepts the words for what they are: the truth.

They sit and experience Midoriya Izuku’s later memories as they come to him. He is in an apartment all by himself, cleaning up and moving rotted couches around. He looks to be only eleven, and Nana feels sympathy tug at her again when she watches his gaunt face split into pride at his own work.

Movement catches the corner of her eye, and she looks outside of the memory to see the boy’s vestige glowering in the sidelines.

“Speak of the devil,” she says.

Vestige Izuku walks past so fast that he’s nearly gliding, leaving cackling red electricity in his wake. Even for a semi-cloudy figure, the pout on his face is clearly visible.

Nana pops a brow and leans back on her palms. “He looks happy.”

“He’s upset that I'm in his realm again,” Yoichi explains, almost amused. “He only isn’t attacking me because you’re here this time around.”

“It’s the privilege of being his favorite user.”

“We both know his master is his favorite by far.”

Nana sighs to herself. “Oh, I don’t know about that these days.”

They continue watching the flippant memories, shoulders brushing,

but when the silence has stretched on for far too long, Yoichi looks at her with white hair falling in front of his face. “There is a certain portion of our shared power that I’ve let none of you truly explore. On the other side of this eternal void, my brother lies in wait.” Yoichi swipes the next memory away and picks a bright white orb instead, holding it carefully in his palms. “He makes up nearly half of One for All’s strength with his sheer devotion. Without his presence attached to this realm like a tic on a dog, we would not have survived for this long. I’m sure you’ve come to that conclusion, however.”

She bows her head and doesn’t say a word, waiting for Yoichi to continue as he so rarely does.

“My quirk holds all of our powers within it to act as an energy field. But, it also holds his.” His green eyes soften. “And being that he is alive and well, even stronger than before, my brother is actively storing each and every quirk he obtains inside *his* portion of One for All.”

“Do you think he knows this?”

“I don’t believe so, or else he would have already attempted to use it to his advantage.” His head drops even more. Nana wonders if that’s where Izuku gets his bad posture from. “My brother’s side is a pathway to many abilities, some I would consider to be almost… unnatural, even in the scope of modern quirks and medicine.”

Nana watches him closely, connecting the dots. “You’re afraid he’ll go to him?” She whispers, memories of Izuku’s newfound anger and dark expression coming to the front of her mind. It’s an expression she saw the day she died, too, though she tells herself it’s not exactly the same.

“He already has,” Yoichi tells her, and her heart drops. “Just as I suspected he would eventually.”

Her fists clench at the nonchalant way he says it. “Is that why you barred him from coming here? Because you *wanted* him to cross the barrier into his father’s realm?”

“It was a necessity.”

“He’s going to hurt himself,” she says harshly, blood beginning to pound faster in her ears. “It was hard enough for you to withstand his constant manipulation, so what makes you think Izuku will be able to?”

Yoichi only looks at her as if to say, very simply, that he won't. And right then It's altogether too obvious to Nana what Yoichi is attempting to do.

Nana stands up, face stony. "And because he's done what you wanted, you have to keep him away from here or else he'll lead All for One to us?"

"He cannot reach us from his entrance to One for All. But I'm unsure if he could from Izuku's entrance within Extract. It's unfair, and it's sad, I know. But the only way to prevent All for One from breaching us is to cut off Ninth as well."

Ninth. There it is again. Always using the number, the placement, never the name or the relationship Yoichi has with Izuku. *That's your nephew,* she wants to beg, but she knows from past experience that the reminder will not sway his decisions.

"And if you're wrong?" She forces out shakily. "If Izuku won't be able to gain any of the abilities you're hoping for? What, was he just another mistake? Another trial and error after both he and his father have consumed each and every *one* of us?"

Yoichi is quiet for a moment, and in the stillness, Izuku's One for All vestige comes to a stop some hundred feet away and turns to stare, as if to listen too.

"It shouldn't be him, Nana, but it is. And if we're meant to win this time around," he says gravely, turning away to focus on the endless memories, "I know our successors will make sure we do."

The young vestige looks at Nana then before closing its eyes and dissipating in the void around them.

When his mother laid eyes on him for the first time in the hospital, she realized she could never love him. His eyes would not see through her any longer, and his heart would follow a different beat from that point on.

She discarded that young boy the day she met him. The rest is not necessary to know.

The doctor is nameless for a reason. He prefers it that way. He is not the Club's doctor, nor is he a doctor for a singular cause—he is just that: a doctor. He works to perfect his skill and to help where he can, no matter who it's for, because he was made with love but not made to be loved.

And so it came as a surprise to him when he left the darkness he grew up in and found something greater than himself, when he found that perhaps he could *do* something good for once in his life. He would not have to be known by anyone, as he much prefers to keep to himself and be unperceived, but he could still be good for *himself*.

That's what matters the most to him. That's all that ever has.

He has not been perfect, and he wishes he could have the chance to redo things. This is why he even attempted the Restart pill in the first place. A medication that could prolong death, that could bring body parts back together and force the heart to start once more against all odds—it was a dream come true. It was fiction that *he* brought to reality.

He found the cure for mistakes, but even then he has made something imperfect.

The doctor lies on the floor, eyes blurry as his intestines slide back into his body and his torso restitches itself. Blood seeps up from the floorboards and soaks back into him, purifying him.

Dizziness overtakes him, and he needs to throw up again, but he forces himself to his feet. Crimson leaks from his eyes, and his skin is stretched taut.

He has fixed the rather unfortunate side effects and problems with the earlier versions of this miracle drug—it works faster now, and it doesn't let any excruciating pain linger wherever the lethal injury occurred. In doing so, however, he has introduced another issue. This one is much *larger* than all the others.

The man breathes hard and faces his attacker. He is not surprised by these events, not at all. He knew he was walking into dangerous territory. He knew there was a chance he would not return to the place he resided and sometimes called home.

He was needed in this part of Japan for urgent medical care, as some ex-members of the Club here were caught up in Nomu exterminations and couldn't get into any of the hospitals with who they were.

Thankfully, he has already done exactly what he said he would, and he saved the people he saw, which leads him to believe this was not a trap. It was not an ambush.

He was simply ordered to be killed at the wrong time.

Staring into the wispy yellow eyes of a mutant he once worked alongside, the doctor almost laughs. This is so ironic.

He is cornered, regrettably. He already came back to life once, as his attacker blew a hole straight through his middle using a few well-placed portals. On top of that, the doctor's quirk is no longer present.

This is where the new problem with the drug comes in.

He was rushing too much. He was paying too much attention to the *physically staying alive* part that he forgot that he also had to be mindful of a person's quirk gene—which has, since the dawn of its inception, acted as a cancer. And so, in exchange for another chance at life, this drug takes away a person's quirk and repurposes its energy.

The doctor's quirk was always considered overpowered. It was a defense mechanism he used to escape situations—touching his skin meant extreme, blinding pain. Pain that overloads the senses and cause's unfixable hysteria.

The issue is that Kurogiri here had the perfect counter. He could use portals to avoid touching the doctor's skin. So, the man is not too upset. Losing his quirk means nothing to him since it would not have helped against the portal user.

He leans back against a table, wiping the blood trails off his face. "What, is the *demon lord* too important to come finish me off himself? After all I did for him," he adds sarcastically.

Kurogiri rumbles, his cold purple mist expanding around him and blocking out all the light, "Master wishes you a warm return to the afterlife, Densaku."

The doctor huffs, deflating. What is it with people and using a name he doesn't go by anymore? Can't they see he has never in his life limited himself to such trivial things. Without enough breath to voice this, the man gets to the more important question. "Is this supposed to be the boy's punishment for Hosu?"

“No,” Kurogiri says, stepping closer, hovering over the blood pooling on the floor. He sounds almost sad. “It is his reward.”

“Oh, right, because that makes sense.” The doctor holds onto the edge of the table, stabilizing himself as his body is redone. “That bastard is as sick as I remember, then.”

A portal opens beneath him, and he moves just in time to avoid being consumed—but he’s not fast enough to save his feet. Severed cleanly just above the shins, the doctor stumbles and falls hard, the effects of the drug he injected himself with just moments prior struggling to work again. As he crawls from the icy depths of nothingness threatening to settle in his mind, another emotion enters him: exhaustion.

He is not old, but he would not consider himself young either. He has done what he’s always dreamed of. What more could a man ask for out of life?

Kurogiri is upon him now, crouching down to meet his gaze. “My apologies for the circumstances. This is not personal. You served Master fairly well in the time you gave him.”

The doctor shakes his head, trembling now. “I never served him. I have only ever served that boy, and even then I have failed him.” He sucks in a breath, knuckles turning light. “There is nothing left for me to accomplish now. I have already done all I could.”

He has kept the last few doses of the drug to himself for weeks. Only recently—just a few days ago, actually—did he send the injections back to the Club for someone else to hold onto. Someone he felt he owed a debt to.

“Kill me,” he invites, unperturbed. “You will still see remnants of me in every face you come across, Kurogiri, as I have helped thousands to survive against your master’s wrath.”

The man knows he will not win, but this does not stop him from lurching forward with what strength he has left, his hand reaching past the smoke and aiming for Kurogiri’s neck brace. It is a last, lame attempt to kill him, but he only did it to have a quicker end.

His mind is empty, his body done fighting against death.

Portals close around his middle and neck, and he welcomes the icy void taking him in this time. There’s pain, but only for a moment.

And then the unnamed doctor is released from the devil's hold.

Chapter End Notes

death inspires me like a dog inspires a rabbit

nezu: midoriya is a ward of the state
monoma: damn this bitch an orphan??

l

urgency

Chapter Notes

> happy new year :) this may be the last time i get to say that in this fic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All Might isn't at school the next morning.

Izuku feels stupid, as he knew the first and second year hero students had the day off today. Considering that, why did he think Yagi would be at school? He only teaches heroics. There's no reason for him to be here unless he had something planned for the third year students.

Shouta, on the other hand, also teaches hero principles and law to some of the business classes, meaning he still has to work. Izuku came in today with him and Hizashi, who teaches English and thus also must be here, for the sole purpose of seeing Yagi, but now he regrets it. So, after realizing he psyched himself up to apologize to his mentor all for nothing, Izuku heads for the cafeteria to take his mind off the events of the night before.

Lunch Rush only did half of the meal prep, so Izuku begins to finish what he started. With his hair tied back and a stained apron on, Izuku can feel like someone other than himself.

His movements are jittery as he cuts vegetables in the quiet of the kitchen. After that, he shaves some potatoes, face pinched.

It's still early in the morning, so he has at least another hour before anyone comes in for breakfast.

Well, he thought he did.

Izuku keeps his hand on his knife when he feels Gran Torino walk into the cafeteria wing. His shoes don't make a sound, and since Gran is incredibly short, Izuku can't see him over the high counter he's behind.

He's gauging everything off of the feel of his quirk and the emptiness in the air.

"Good morning," Izuku greets first, skin prickling. "Are you teaching

the third years today?"

This is a nicer way of asking *what the fuck are you doing here? I know you used to be a teacher here, but damn, get over it.*

Gran Torino walks inside the kitchen, and Izuku's eye twitches. It takes more strength for him to refrain from complaining about Gran's uncleanliness than it did for him to hold off those dinosaurs.

"Toshi's not here today," Gran says, completely ignoring the previous question. He comes to a stop a few feet away from Izuku, who subtly slides his workstation a yard or so back.

"I know. He didn't have to be."

"You didn't have to be, either."

Izuku uses Pull to grab the basket of fresh fruits he took out from the walk-in refrigerator earlier. "I'm only here for this. I'll probably leave after I'm done."

Gran leans against the cabinets. "So you're telling me you came all this way to cut up some vegetables?"

Izuku frowns and gives him a confused glance. "We don't live that far from here. And I like doing this. There's no one here to bother me."

Usually.

Gran rolls his eyes. "Your teachers stayin' the whole day?"

"They kinda have to."

"Good. Would they mind if I take you back to Hosu for a while?"

The simple question makes Izuku press down a lot harder than he would've liked on the coconut he's preparing. It snaps cleanly in half, with one end of it falling down into the sink and losing all of its milk. The boy's heart rate increases exponentially just at those few words. "What? You want me to go to Hosu again?"

"There are a few things I want you to see over there. Things I'm relatively sure are related to All for One."

Izuku sets down the knife he's holding. He really doesn't want to go back to that place, as the memories there are like fresh burn scars on his skin, but he knows that's a pathetic excuse. "All Might would

probably want to be the first to see it, then."

"He's headed to an island right now off the southern coast, so that's not an option. You're my second choice. Although I wager you'd have a better guess about this stuff than he would." He crosses his arms at the last sentence.

Izuku can't even process the praise, though, as he's stuck on the first part. "He's not in Japan?"

"He left about an hour ago for one of our territories." Gran sniffs, swiping a hand across his nose. "He was needed for a special operation just to ensure things went smoothly."

Why didn't he tell me? Izuku can't help but think, feeling torn. *He just got back, and he's leaving again?*

But then another thought comes from this: why should he tell Izuku?

"That's why he's not here today?" He whispers. *Not because he just didn't feel like it?*

Gran blinks at him, unimpressed. "Why else would he not be? Did ya really think he'd skip out on a chance to train one on one with you, even on a day off, if he had a choice in the matter?" Izuku winces, and Gran's head tips back in dark understanding. "Oh, I remember now. Lately, you've been rejecting his offers to train, haven't ya?"

Immediately, Izuku's cheeks heat up, and he bristles. "I haven't been rejecting any—"

Gran waves his argument off. "Whatever's going on with you two, I don't care. It'll pass, I'm sure of it. Just make sure not to do anything you can't take back."

The certainty of his words makes Izuku stumble over his next counter. He keeps his mouth shut, feeling suddenly small. Has Izuku already done things he can't undo? Has he already permanently damaged his and Yagi's relationship?

Even now their shared bond grows weaker by the day inside Izuku's head. Link allows him to sense nearly every emotion the people close to him feel, and it's been getting harder to sense Yagi's. He wonders if it's the same on his mentor's end, too.

"Gran," Izuku begins softly, cutting off whatever tirade the man was

launching into. Right now, Izuku is treading farther into uncharted territory than he ever has before. “Did he—did he ever have, like, *disagreements* with, uh, his…”

“With Shimura?” Gran finishes, and unlike Yagi, his tone doesn’t change one bit when he mentions her. When Izuku nods, now looking at him as if he holds the answers to the stars and everything in between, the man only sighs and closes his eyes. “I’ll be honest with you, kid. They didn’t have enough time together to even have those kinds of fights. That brat practically worshiped the ground she walked on for the first few months anyway.” His eyes find the ceiling then. “Though, now that I think about it, I remember a few times where they argued, but it was all mostly minor stuff. Why do you ask?”

Izuku stares down at the work in front of him. The colors look dull to him now. “I don’t know.” He’s about to leave it at that and ask Gran to forget what he asked at all when his chest gives a sharp twinge. He bites his inner lip and lifts a shoulder. “I feel like I’ve caused a lot of trouble for him. Especially lately. And I just…”

Why is he still talking? Why is he being so open with Gran Torino? Is it because he feels no animosity or annoyance coming from the man, only neutral curiosity? Or maybe it’s because he can sense Hound Dog at the corners of every hallway and hear his encouraging words in his ears, promising sweets if he can achieve the goals he set with him?

Izuku’s eyes blur. “I worry. A lot. About, like…”

Belonging.

Gran nods quietly, hearing the unspoken word. He pushes off the side of the cabinets and points his cane at Izuku to get his attention. “Listen. If you can’t tell, Toshinori and I don’t always see eye to eye. It’s just how we are, and it’s how I operate. I won’t apologize for that. But what I’m trying to say here is that a couple of arguments aren’t going to ruin all that you two have worked towards. One for All is a heavy burden just as much as it is a gift. You cannot expect yourself to be on the same page as him all the time. That’s stupid, and it’ll only cause you both more pain.”

Izuku takes too long to process the words, evidently, as Gran whacks Izuku in the shins with his heavy cane. Izuku yelps and immediately stumbles back, face screwed up. Despite the sudden pain, Izuku is assured by the fact that Danger Sense didn’t go off.

“You’re not a bad kid,” Gran tells him now that Izuku is giving him his

full attention—albeit angrily. “You make Toshinori and I proud on more occasions than you think. That doesn’t mean we don’t see your past or recognize your mistakes, but it does mean we won’t judge or hate you for them.” He doesn’t give Izuku the chance to respond to the kind words, as next he’s back to his impatient self. “Now, are you going to Hosu or not?”

Izuku has to shake himself to get his mind off of what the older man just told him. His heart feels warm now, and he has to stop the floaty feeling inside his chest before it swallows him whole. “I’m sorry, but today I have plans. I need to talk to Sir Nighteye, and this is probably the only good chance I’ll get for a while. Is the stuff at Hosu urgent?”

Gran’s face darkens fast, and he shakes his head. “It can wait a day or two, but I gotta warn ya, I don’t think you’ll find anything useful at that agency now.”

“Why?”

“If you think I’m a hardass,” he says with a snort, “wait until you meet Mirai. He’s not near as sweet as Toshinori might have told you.”

Izuku frowns. “I know he doesn’t like me because of—of me having One for All and everything, but what else—”

“It runs deeper than that, kid. You should know how obsessed he is with making sure things run smoothly in every plan he’s a part of. He’s a perfectionist—and one hell of a control freak. If you’re not a part of the solutions he’s reached in his mind, he won’t want anything to do with you. And if you try to intervene anyway? Well, good luck to you.”

“I take it I’m not a part of his solutions at all.”

“Most people aren’t,” the old hero grunts. “But I guess you can’t exactly blame a guy for acting so pushy when he’s got a quirk like that. It’s enough to make anyone crazy.”

Izuku decides to take another leap. Gran has never been this easy to talk to before, so he’s going to take advantage of it. “Yagi said they used to be tight. Like really, really tight.” He swallows. “Why did they ever stop talking?”

“He never told you?” When Izuku looks away awkwardly, Gran huffs, looking the boy up and down a few times. “Gee, no wonder you two are struggling. Keeping so many secrets from each other will only

widen the gap between you both. It's not smart."

Izuku feels that same hot defensiveness threatening to come back with a vengeance in his gut, and he wants to snap back at Gran on All Might's behalf, but the words don't come to him in time.

"It's like I said, kid," the man begins, and he's not looking in Izuku's direction now. "He saw a problem, and Toshinori refused to make the solution a reality, so he didn't want to be a part of it. Said he just couldn't handle it."

"So he left him?" Izuku asks, words careful as they make their way to Gran.

"He did. Though, from what I've seen, he still tries to find other ways to help. But some things just can't be changed unless the other side agrees."

Izuku has nothing to say on that, as this story doesn't feel so unfamiliar to him. His heart gives a painful twinge at the thought, and he starts to carefully clean up his makeshift workstation.

Gran flicks a hand. "I won't discourage you from going. Do what you need, figure everything out, then get back to me. It'd do you some good to know that the principal here has already been talking with him about you, so he's aware of a lot of the shitshow that happened a week or so ago. He's not gonna hurt ya, obviously, but just keep that in mind and remember what I told you."

Izuku uses Black Whip to put away the food he prepared, and he begins working on the dishes he dirtied. "Thank you, sir. I—I really do appreciate your insight."

For a second it seems that Gran will leave finally, but then the man stops with his back still turned to Izuku and says, as naturally as if he's mentioning the weather, "Toshi told me you can see them. The past users."

The sudden change of topic doesn't surprise Izuku. He knew All Might would confide in his old teacher about this, so he had already prepared himself.

Izuku doesn't look away from his cleaning. "I'm not making it up."

"Didn't say you were. How often does it happen?"

“Not a lot anymore,” Izuku admits with a slight wince, not willing to explain that he was actually banned from accessing One for All’s realm recently. “But a week or so ago, I’d say I would get glimpses of them at least a couple of times a day.”

“When do they usually occur?”

“Mostly when they’re talking to me, or when I’m—I’m thinking about them. I noticed that it happens more when I’m hurt. That’s, uh, actually why I used to think I was just hallucinating them.”

Gran lets a dry snort escape him. “That’d be a hell of a thing to just imagine. And their forms, they’re not corporeal?”

“No. I can pass right through them if they’re in front of me.” Izuku takes a brush and scrubs the utensils he was using. “I feel them, though. Like, their energy field, if that makes sense. Extract can ping their quirks, too, depending on how ‘whole’ their figure is at the time.”

“I take it that means you can also see him.”

Izuku stops his scrubbing, still elbow deep in the water. The question was asked so naturally that Izuku almost didn’t get how weird it is for Gran to even know to ask that.

Him. There’s only one *him* the hero could be referring to.

Izuku’s gaze slides over to Gran, who is now facing him with neutral eyes. The boy feels like he’s been caught in headlights even though he’s done nothing wrong. “Yes,” he says, barely loud enough to count as a spoken word. “I can.”

“When?”

The shadows extending from Gran’s body turn darker, dancing a little, and Izuku swallows. “Always.”

Gran’s expression doesn’t change, and Izuku holds onto this fact. “So, you could see him even before getting One for All?”

Izuku fears it’s a trap but steps into the cage anyway. “I could, but it was never this bad before.”

He prepares for a lot of things from this answer. He half expects Gran to complain about him never telling anyone or trying to receive help,

but no such insults are thrown his way. In fact, there isn't even an inkling of suspicion on his person. It's so unnerving that Izuku nearly wishes there was at least a little bit.

It is too early for these kinds of conversations. Izuku just wants to finish these dishes.

"I'm gonna ask you something, brat, and you can't freak out on me," Gran says, and Izuku's stomach drops to his ass.

Well, so much for that.

"Sure, sir," he replies, pursing his lips.

"If you took my quirk, would I be able to see her again?"

Izuku studies the sponge he's holding. It's yellow on one side, green on the other. The green side is the rough part, and Izuku doesn't know who decided that. Was it simply luck of the draw? Did the manufacturers not like green? Is there some other company out there who has flipped the colors in reverse, with green instead being the soft side for once?

He stares at the green side, noting the gunk on the coarse bristles, and asks himself how he's supposed to respond to Gran Torino's question.

Izuku drags his gaze away from the sponge with furrowed brows and sad, sad eyes. "I would say so," he whispers, and Gran looks away without even an acknowledgement.

What would you like me to say? Izuku wants to ask, because it's such an interesting thing to wonder aloud. *I can say no if you want, or I can nod my head if you ask me to.*

When Gran makes no motion to say anything in response, Izuku rakes his eyes over his disheveled form, taking in the way his clothes look to have been through hell and back. He must be working nonstop as well.

Izuku wishes he could ask Shimura Nana if he's making the right choice in finishing his thoughts at all.

"Would you…" Izuku swallows and starts over. His fingers are pruning up. "I mean… Is that what you'd want me to—"

"Shut it," Gran snaps, but there's no real anger around his person.

“You won’t be getting anywhere near me with that damned quirk of yours. I don’t need you to do anything for me, so don’t even entertain that idea. Even if I’m *dying,* don’t you do it.”

“Okay,” Izuku promises, and he looks down at the dirty water, searching for his reflection. “Okay, sir.”

A bitter silence spreads between them, and Izuku’s eyes burn for some reason. He needs his eye drops; the cold weather has been making them itch more fiercely.

When the boy is about to break and ask his master’s teacher why he would even bother bringing it up if he had no intention of asking that of Izuku, Gran grunts and shakes himself.

“It would be nice, though,” he admits gruffly, already making for the double doors to leave.

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees eventually, even as the feeling of Gran’s quirk moves farther and farther away, “it would be.”

For once in his life, Izuku forgoes the mask.

He sits in a chair in one corner of Sir Nighteye’s large office, his back to the wall and his body layered in shadows. The room is dark, as there’s no one inside but him.

It’s still early in the morning. There are only fourteen heroes in the entire agency at this moment, most of them sidekicks. Izuku counts three more in the intern offices.

In an hour or so, more people will come in for work to receive their assigned routes for the day. Groups will come and go, reporting in and out. It’s cyclic, steady, and quiet.

Izuku has never understood the appeal to it. He wants to fight and protect people, and he’d do anything, no matter how demeaning, to achieve that. But doing the same thing over and over and over again? How is that living? Wouldn’t you be stuck after a while? Wouldn’t you lose your edge?

What would it take for someone like Izuku to continue to do things the way he used to at the Club? Does he even want to be a professional hero if this is what will greet him every day of his remaining time here on Earth?

Perhaps Shouta has the right idea with underground work. If only people understood that Rabbit is his version of that. If only people would realize he does not fight for Rabbit because he wants to be in control. He fights because he wants to be free to help in the best way he can.

The Nighteye Agency was harder for Izuku to slip into than Endeavor's was. It's a product of the man's high intellect, no doubt. He has heroes watching the agency itself at all times, and the security systems weren't as simple for Izuku to mess up as he would've liked.

It took him thirty minutes to make it to where he is without interacting directly with anyone. He could've been in here faster if he decided to just take out the heroes stationed around this area, but that would mean he'd be a part of their life directly, and Izuku wasn't willing to bet on whether or not Sir Nighteye read their futures at any point in time.

Besides, knocking out the members of his agency wouldn't make for a good first impression. Or any impression, for that matter.

In the pitch black of the room, Izuku sits with his arms crossed and one leg over the other, feeling cold. He can't lie and say he's not incredibly anxious. Hell, he didn't even feel this nervous when breaking into Endeavor's place the first time, or when he had to face All Might after nearly blinding Shouta.

He really needs this to go well, and he knows the chances of that happening are slim to none. Well, actually, maybe just none.

There are four books on All Might in the room. Izuku sees eight posters of him, each one showing a different look of his throughout the ages. He also notices twelve figurines and sixteen cut out newspaper articles about him.

Izuku is willing to bet there are twenty hidden pieces of other merchandise somewhere in the room.

The clock on the wall above Nighteye's desk makes its two thousandth click—it is now the time the man usually walks into the building.

As if on cue, Extract buzzes inside him, pinging Foresight. Izuku may have stalked Sir Nighteye's habits some months before, so he's familiar with his daily routines. He takes five minutes to check the reports his assistants have compiled for him, and then he goes to the intern wing to get a look at their progress, which takes him ten minutes. Afterwards, he meets with his sidekicks briefly to answer any questions, adding anywhere between six and fifteen minutes to his total time depending on who is on the clock that day.

Finally, Sir Nighteye will walk into his office, where he'll make for the left side of the room and brew his coffee. He uses two tablespoons of hazelnut creamer and three pumps of liquid cane sugar. He prefers that instead of granulated sugar, oddly enough.

The entire process takes four minutes and seventeen seconds. Those are regular days, however.

On bad days, on days where Sir Nighteye has a lot on his plate, it turns into five minutes and two seconds. The extra forty-five seconds is spent with him meticulously checking that his figurines and posters are in the exact place he expects them to be in.

With everything that has been going on lately, Izuku bets this will be a bad day.

He listens to the clock tick and waits for the man to arrive, counting. His anxiety is through the roof, and he pulls out his phone briefly to check his vitals, which are read by his wristband: *135/85 mmHg.*

Not horrible for him, but also not great. He needs to pull himself together.

He just needs Sir Nighteye's help. He doesn't need his approval. He doesn't *want* his approval, either. So why is he so nervous?

There are two things wrong immediately upon Sir Nighteye's entrance. One: the lights in the room don't turn on until the door opens and reaches a 25 degree angle. Usually, the lights come on automatically before the outside handle is even turned, which is why this is weird. And two: the first thing Izuku sees is a mug of steaming coffee held between long fingers.

Oh, Izuku thinks, realizing he's fucked, *just my luck. He normally never accepts the coffee his interns offer him.*

He was right; today is a bad day. Not for Nighteye, but for Izuku.

The tall hero takes one and a quarter steps inside the room, and Izuku does a brief overview of his appearance before he can be spotted to make sure nothing else is amiss: he has on a pristine silver business suit with a white button-up shirt underneath, a red and white speckled tie, and his triangular glasses.

There are three strips of yellow in his short green hair, two on the right side of his head and the other on the left.

So far, everything is fine. But that doesn't mean Izuku will be saved.

In fact, when Sir Nighteye makes it to one and a half steps, his hand reaches for the inside of his jacket. Without looking in Izuku's direction, he throws two of the high-density seals he keeps on him so quickly that Izuku almost doesn't register it at first. They shoot toward him like bullets, but the boy has long since had his arms crossed with Deflect activated.

The seals bounce off the shimmering barrier and head right back for Sir Nighteye, who catches them both without preamble. It's only then that he turns his head to look at Izuku, who must look *incredibly* funny right now with his wide eyes and his mouth gaping open. Because, sure, he knew the hero would likely strike first, but using *two seals?*

If Izuku didn't block them, his insides would be splattered on the wall behind him right now!

It doesn't help his case that he's so short that the chair he's sitting on looks to be three times too large for him. It's almost comical.

Green eyes meet stony yellow, and Izuku can't stop his big mouth from opening. "Your reaction time is slower than Endeavor's."

The response is quick and scathing. Sir Nighteye surely notes the boy's vigilante costume and unmasked face but doesn't seem to be one for unnecessary greetings. "What makes you think you can come skulking into my agency without my permission like some kind of delinquent?" He begins instead, his gaze intense.

The door snaps shut behind him, and Izuku jumps. He has to fight to calm down again. "Must be because you're so warm and inviting, sir," he says, but his voice is quivering.

What's wrong with me?

Nighteye scoffs and strolls to his desk, his strides long and fast—

except he doesn't turn his back completely to Izuku, not for one second.

"Leave my office before I lose what little patience I have left this morning. I have no intentions of meddling with the likes of you."

Izuku shouldn't respond to the insult, but he can't help himself. He stands from his chair, a certain tang of heat erupting in his lower stomach. "The likes of me?"

The man sets his mug on a stone coaster sitting on the desk and pins him with a hard stare. "Yes," he reiterates icily. "You and your mediocre affiliations at best are nothing more than egocentric criminals cosplaying as heroes."

Egocentric? Izuku has to think about that for a second, because there's no fucking way he's calling the Club members wannabe heroes, not when their feats amount to more than most hero agencies put together these days.

True to his word, Nighteye's patience is thin, and he doesn't wait for Izuku's response before gesturing to the window on the left side of the room. "Get out, and you will not step another foot back inside this agency unless you wish to be sent back to your teachers in a cage."

The severity of the words makes Izuku pause. He tips his head, holding his Rabbit mask with tight hands out in front of him. "Wouldn't be the first time. You know, I'm surprised you're acknowledging me at all right now, sir. What, are you not going to ask me to tell you a joke first?"

Izuku's research points to the fact that Sir Nighteye is all about humor. He won't even *talk* to his interns or sidekicks without them first being able to make him smile. It's a trait he developed from years of working alongside All Might as his partner.

A key to making society better is to ensure everyone is laughing. At least, that's Sir Nighteye's philosophy.

Does Izuku understand it? Somewhat. Yagi has always told him to smile even when he's at his moodiest, so this isn't his first time being exposed to this ideal, but does that mean he's going to be participating in this cultish laughing business? No.

Though he should be careful. Sir Nighteye has a death tickle machine that looks like it's from the Middle Ages and may also violate four

articles of the Geneva Convention, so he needs to avoid that at all costs.

“I don’t care for the foolishness that has brought you here,” Sir Nighteye grinds out, and he swipes a hand across the air before him, bringing up his holographic computer. “You’re not worth my time.”

Izuku feels the fire in him expand. He hates being ignored almost as much as he hates thick peanut butter.

He expected many things: more insults, maybe another warning strike to get Izuku to back off, or perhaps a direct call to the Principal to snitch on him—but not this.

Izuku steels his nerves and walks to stand on the other side of the floating hologram, meeting Nighteye’s eyes through the bright blue. “You knew I’d come here.”

“You’re not nearly as unpredictable as other heroes say.”

“No one is unpredictable to you,” Izuku points out. At this reminder, the boy makes sure to keep an eye on Nighteye’s hands at all times.

Foresight allows Sir Nighteye to read someone’s exact future, including every little minuscule detail of it, for an hour after making eye contact and touching the person’s skin. An hour is enough time for Sir Nighteye to see as far into the future as the person’s death, but he’s unable to activate Foresight again on that particular person for a whole twenty-four hours.

Not that there are many uses for seeing someone’s death more than once.

Either way, Izuku doesn’t want Sir Nighteye using Foresight on him for obvious reasons.

“I have a job to continue, one which doesn’t involve you in the slightest.” Saying this, Nighteye pushes up his glasses and makes another swipe down the screen. “Your entitlement doesn’t help your case, either. Though I shouldn’t be surprised, given what you are.”

Izuku’s nostrils flare, but he hangs his head respectfully and forges on. “All Might-sensei told me a little about how you—”

“You think invoking his name gives you some kind of credibility here?”

“No.” Izuku’s cheeks are red. “And this isn’t about All Might—or me. I’m here to talk about Overhaul.”

Sir Nighteye turns away. “I know, but you’ll only be disappointed. Such topics aren’t meant to be discussed with children.”

“I have a hard time believing that’s what you care about.”

“Caring for someone else’s beliefs is not a standard I hold myself to. Believe what you like.”

Izuku begins to feel a tingle at the base of his skull, warning him of impending danger, but he can’t give up now. He just can’t. “That’s fine. And *you* can dislike me all you want. I don’t need you to care about me. I’m only asking for a chance to set aside everything for just a second so we can talk about what we can do from here regarding the drugs. This is way bigger than—”

“Bigger than what?” Nighteye asks, and he’s close now, his shoes clacking against the terrazzo. “You and your checkered past? Your motives? You may have been able to fool *them,* Midoriya, but you can not fool me. Do whatever you like, but I will not be working with criminals. Now, I’ll give you the courtesy of one last warning to leave before I carry out my threat.”

For a few moments, there is a stand-off, and Izuku moves first, keeping every move deliberate and open. He pulls out the file he’s kept inside his costume and presents it to Nighteye, who looks with a critical gaze.

“Please,” Izuku says, “give me five minutes. Hear what I have for you first, and if you’re still not satisfied, I’ll leave and never ask you again.”

There is a heavy feeling settling in the air. It’s almost electric. *Cloying.*

Sir Nighteye’s eyes drag up to pierce into Izuku’s soul, and the boy steels himself, remembering Gran’s words: *he’s not near as sweet as Toshinori might have told you.*

Izuku knows what the emotion exuding from Nighteye is now. It’s disdain.

And he has a lot of it.

Nighteye scoffs. “I don’t think you understand. We have had the

minimum information needed to conduct a raid for weeks now. The reason we have held back is the lack of clearance from the Hero's Public Safety council, not that I should have to explain that to you. Either way, handing over whatever incomplete notes you've put together isn't going to help with that in the slightest."

"The more information we have, the more willing the Commission will be in giving the green light. That includes having a set plan, which I *have."* Izuku chances a step toward Nighteye and holds out the files he's been compiling ever since he was assigned this mission. "I'm in the process of asking the Commission to expedite the pre-investigation. I'm waiting for their response."

"If you believe they'll aid us in this now, especially with such little notice, you are even more naive than I originally thought."

"I have names, quirks, occupations, past undocumented crimes, daily routines, personalities, and more, on nearly every person closely associated with Chisaki Kai." Izuku keeps his face set, his lips pressed in a thin line. More people are entering the agency down below, and he keeps their locations in mind as he talks. "Their main facility is huge, and I managed to formulate a few versions of its schematics, as the walls and rooms change every so often at random due to one of Overhaul's most trusted pupils. It's not perfect, but it's enough. There are five spots the girl is usually in, so with your agency's help, we can narrow it down once we get inside—"

Nighteye cuts him off with that same displeased edge to his voice. "Am I supposed to trust whatever source you received this information from?"

"It's my research," Izuku bites, a bit of possessiveness overtaking him. "I retrieved a majority of it all myself, and I have the footage and dates to back it all up." Without another word, he pulls out his phone and allows his own hologram to come to life. He pinches a locked folder and sends it towards Nighteye's computer, which accepts all the files within it readily. "You're free to look at it yourself and come to your own conclusions if you think I'm lying, but you'll just be wasting time."

Sir Nighteye is a much faster reader than Endeavor was. He flips through the pages like he's reading a children's book. "If you've had this much intel from the start, why haven't you already attempted a raid yourself?"

“I don’t have enough numbers.”

“Your little branch at that Club consists of over two hundred criminals by now,” Nighteye recalls flatly, and Izuku feels uneasy at the fact that he even knows that.

“Yes, and each one of them would be hunted down regardless of the outcome of the raid. Until the Commission answers my request, we are still illegal, and any operations conducted by me would be punishable to the full extent of the law. I can’t do that to them. It’s why I’ve waited this long.”

“So, you expect me to lend you my contacts and *my* heroes to take the place of your members?”

Izuku isn’t going to sugarcoat it. He and Sir Nighteye both like business, it seems, so he’s going to keep everything strictly professional. “As pro heroes, you will always be regarded as greater than us. The simple fact is, you are backed by the law at all times, at least as seen by the public, and we are not. Once word gets out about the raid, hopefully *after* it’s done, citizens will be comforted by the fact it was done by heroes, and you’ll get away with any insubordination with only a slap on the wrist. But if an army of vigilantes were responsible for it instead, even ones who have received good publicity in the past?” Izuku’s eyes search the ceiling. “It would be a death sentence, especially in this period of time where everyone is on edge. Even with Commissional approval, I fear things will end up like that anyway if the Club orchestrates everything.”

Sir Nighteye is now on the other side of the room, dragging his holograms with him. He is creating a board of sorts with the information Izuku sent over. “Who else knows about all of this?”

“A couple of my teachers have been told the sparknotes, but I wasn’t going to involve them fully until I knew your response first.” The boy fiddles with his sleeves. “And I was hoping you’d be willing to expand that list.”

“You want me to start gathering teams.”

Something lightweight expands in Izuku’s chest. “The sooner we can share these plans and ideas with other heroes, the sooner we can proceed.”

“Most of my contacts are preoccupied with Nomu patrol duties and assignments by their own agencies in efforts to calm civilians down. It

will be difficult to form a villain raid team with such short notice."

"This is the best time to strike," Izuku says, a step away from pleading. "With everything going on, Overhaul won't expect us to go for him now. If you don't have enough for a raid squad, I can afford to bring one or two of my strongest members to fill in the gaps, but that's it."

The mood drops once the last sentence escapes Izuku's mouth. Nighteye gives him a dirty look and continues his work, still disgusted by the idea of Izuku interfering.

Too bad the boy doesn't give a shit about that. He lives to stick his nose into other people's business.

"I didn't give this to you for free," he warns, hands stuffed in his pockets. "No offense, but a lot of this information couldn't have been found by your agency, even if you had more months to dig for it all. I only had access to this stuff because I'm not bound by the law, so you're welcome, I guess."

"Using your research to plan the mission isn't rewarding enough?" Sir Nighteye baits.

"What I'm asking for in exchange are the documents on the drugs Overhaul has been releasing little by little. I wasn't able to get my hands on a sample. I hear that you, however, were."

"And why would someone like you need the details on that?"

"I know people capable of making powerful drugs, too," Izuku informs, the doctor's face coming to mind. "I assume you've already had your team break down some of the substances in it. If I can pass that information on to my client, he may be able to create something of use. Maybe a preventative."

Sir Nighteye laughs, but it's colder than All Might's could ever be. "Do that, and I'm sure by morning the entire underground will know how to recreate the quirk-erasing drug we're trying to destroy. What a brilliant idea."

"I don't need the sample itself, just a copy of any notes your team has taken on it."

"That's not going to happen."

Izuku keeps his voice level, not wanting to set Nighteye off. “I’m sorry, but I’m not asking.”

Sometimes, when Izuku pushes Shouta or Hizashi too far, he gets rewarded with a *look.* He is not scolded, or yelled at, or even punished. He is just subjected to a silent stare, one with a million words behind it, and Izuku, feeling as though he’s been dipped in acid, will immediately back down and apologize, waving it off to assure his teachers he was only joking.

He heard Sero talk about this with Kaminari a few weeks ago. Apparently, their parents do it as well. There’s no official name for it, but Sero calls it the *I’m going to give you one chance to rethink what you just said before I explode* look. A mouthful, in Izuku’s opinion. He personally calls it the *you’re fucked* glare.

At this very moment, right after Izuku finishes his declaration, Sir Nighteye snaps his head to the side and gives Izuku this same look. However, there’s a noticeable difference in how he presents it versus how Izuku’s teachers do.

While Shouta and Hizashi usually have an air of warning or exasperation to them, Sir Nighteye has neither of those things. Instead, he sports such a *loathing* look that Izuku very nearly chokes on his own spit in cold shock.

The hostility that hits Izuku is enough to make the boy drop his gaze. There’s only one other person Izuku can think of that has shown him such aggression so openly, and he doesn’t like the implications of that.

Guess I shouldn’t have tried to threaten him, he thinks to himself.

No, do it again, his father whispers in his ear. *Sometimes they’ll respond the way you want after a few tries.*

“You’re not asking?” Sir Nighteye repeats, words dripping with something poisonous. He straightens himself up, expression piercing. “That’s funny. Do you think you have any grounds to demand anything here? Do you really?” The mocking tone is gone when he next speaks. “Don’t mistake my patience for fear or hesitation. If you step even a hair out of line, I will put you down myself.”

Izuku is painfully aware of the man’s every move. He stares at his hands, watching where they’re headed—he doesn’t want any kind of touch from him.

Sir Nighteye may be fast, and he's muscular—especially with the high density seals he carries around everywhere—but Izuku is stronger and beats him in speed. With Danger Sense, there's no way Izuku would lose. All he needs to do is make sure Nighteye can't touch him—if he doesn't, he can't use Foresight on him.

He just has to really pay attention.

"I'm sorry," Izuku says, and forcing those two words out of his mouth is akin to pulling teeth. "We're running out of time here, so I'm stressed. I don't mean to undermine you."

His genuine apology must do something for the hero. Sir Nighteye lifts up his chin a fraction, but his lips are twisted. In displeasure?

"I will consider sending a portion of our notes to you if we find your research to be of any substantial use," Nighteye states dryly. "Only if that condition is met will we be in contact with you again. In the meantime, I would work on your attitude. I sincerely doubt your teachers appreciate that mouth."

"You know, for someone so set on creating a happier, more hopeful society, you sure are cynical."

"And you're worse than I am. Would you have stayed holed up in that lonely apartment of yours for so long if you weren't?"

Izuku gently rubs his thumb against his fingertips, unable to look at him any longer. He knew that Sir Nighteye was aware of his background, but hearing him bring up that more recent phase of his life makes a rusted screw dig into Izuku's heart.

It also makes his burning hatred for Nezu grow.

"I guess not," Izuku says, and he returns the chair he was sitting at a few minutes ago to its original spot. "Oh, and by the way, that book on your shelf? The special edition All Might Photo Collection volume two? On page thirty they had to heavily edit his biceps on two of those images so he could fit in the frame. They're not accurate photos like they market them as, and they even denied editing him outright when I called them out on it. You should pay better attention to that stuff before you buy from them. I mean, unless you like throwing your money down the drain."

Sir Nighteye turns the page of one of the files on screen, not deigning with a response. It seems he's in a horrid mood today.

Is it horrid because I walked into it?

Izuku is about to walk away when Sir Nighteye speaks, his voice low and gravelly. “What has All Might told you about me?”

The question makes Izuku pause. He recalls the few rare occasions where All Might discussed Sir Nighteye with him, and he runs his fingers along the edge of the nearby desk. It’s expensive wood, having been recently resealed.

“He said that you were his partner. His best friend. You were the one who did a lot of the thinking when you two were together, right? You managed everything important that he didn’t have time for.” Izuku plays with one of the smaller daggers in the inside of his pocket. “That’s about all he ever said. I filled the rest in on my own.”

Sir Nighteye’s sentences are clipped. “I’m sure you did. It’s safe to assume he also said that you being his successor is the reason I choose to keep my distance from him even now.”

Izuku nods carefully, his skin rising in bumps. “Yes.”

“Well, that’s not the whole truth,” Nighteye says simply, and something about the way the words slide out of his mouth makes Izuku clench the dagger tight enough to whiten his knuckles. “I was furious when he told me he chose you, but that’s not why I refuse to see him.” The man turns, his pale yellow eyes dull and intense. It has Izuku’s gut churning, and his free hand quickly moves behind himself, clutching the collapsible staff he keeps hidden there as a precaution.

Because there it is again: that *anger.* He can sense Nighteye’s fury so clearly that it’s like he can taste it at the roof of his mouth. He can’t even call it contempt anymore, for it’s something worse than that. Hatred doesn’t even begin to describe the spiked heat breaching the air surrounding Izuku.

“I don’t believe you’re a good fit for One for All, that’s true. But his decision doesn’t need my approval. All Might is reckless. He is strong, almost foolishly so, and full of guilt—but he is smarter than most give him credit for.” Sir Nighteye adjusts the angle of his glasses, and for a moment all Izuku sees is white. “He will work himself into a grave despite everyone’s best attempts to get him to quit. That’s how he’s always been.”

“He knows what he's doing,” Izuku defends, feeling weird now that All Might is the subject of Sir Nighteye’s criticisms. He can insult Izuku all

he wants, but what right does he have to extend his irritation to the Symbol of Peace? They're not friends anymore.

"Yes, and that's precisely the issue. He knows he will die, yet he continues to race towards the end as if he's begging for it." When Izuku opens his mouth hotly again to come to his master's defense, Sir Nighteye continues fiercely. "I can see his future in my mind. He is going to throw himself into a battle knowing he has no chance of winning, and he will die just as brutally as he made his debut."

The words are thick and cloying. They reach Izuku but come in through the throat instead of the ears, blocking his airways. The walls don't seem so far away anymore.

Izuku swallows a dry lump. "What are you talking about?"

"He should've retired after he killed All for One."

One for All stirs within Izuku at the mere idea. The boy wonders if the users can still see through him now, or if they have chosen to abandon him entirely and not bother with his perspective. Would he blame them?

Izuku shakes his head. The movements are almost glitchy. "But All for — *he's* still alive, so how would it have helped if All Might retired back then? And why are you even bringing this up?"

"If All Might retired six years ago, this society would've had enough time to prepare for larger villains on their own. We would have more active heroes, more powerful police and military presence, and we wouldn't still be relying on *one man."* Nighteye's face contorts. "He also would've had time to focus on choosing a *rightful* successor, instead of one from the bottom of the barrel."

"He's not alone anymore," Izuku retorts. "Have you been paying attention at all to the efforts we've been making in—"

Nighteye rounds on him. "That doesn't change that he's going to die soon *because of his refusal to quit!"*

The building rattles in tune with his thunderous voice. The buzzing in Izuku's ear quiets down for only a moment, only for this.

Soon? The boy thinks. *Why did he say it like that?*

But then the unforgivable words finally make sense to Izuku, bearing

down on him like an executioner's blade. *I can see his future,* he said, and Izuku wishes he took that little sentence and the grave way in which Nighteye said it seriously the very moment he heard it.

Because, sure, Izuku has always had this fear that All Might would die to All for One if he fought him again, but to actually *hear* it from Sir Nighteye himself, to be told that that's *exactly* the future he is prophesying—it's an electric shock to his nerves.

"He'll lose?" Izuku whispers, the earth swimming around him. Some young part of himself withers at the revolutionary idea.

"Can I ask you something?" He lets slip during the silence in the small room. The doctor's dark eyes find him again, and they're so not-sharp anymore that Izuku wants to throw something at his all knowing face.

The pause Nighteye takes to breathe in feels like a lifetime. "He is going to die a gruesome death. Torn apart by a demon never meant to be born. A mistake." A large, veiny hand runs through shiny hair incessantly. "Murder isn't the right word for it. Each time I revisit that vision in my mind, searching vainly for more details, for clues I might have missed the first viewing, it is always the same, just from different angles. I see him fight, I see him break, and I see a villain, one shrouded in darkness. Every single time."

Sir Nighteye straightens up. He walks through the hologram, and the blue light fizzles around him, washing out the yellow highlights on his green hair and making his silver suit glow. Izuku's world tips beneath him, his mind overloading with thoughts of All Might and his strained smile and encouraging words and lonely eyes. He thinks fleetingly of a horrid starburst scar and a missing lung, and he wants to throw up.

For the first time, Izuku pictures All Might's victorious grin and sees death.

The doctor is unamused. "You know I don't do personal questions."

"But it isn't All for One I see in that future," Sir Nighteye warns. "I was wrong before, I admit. I thought it would be him, that he would somehow come back, that All Might killing him the first time wouldn't be enough. And while I was right in my fears, I realize now where I got it wrong."

He stalks toward Izuku, whose breathing is coming out in high pitched huffs, his eyes locked onto Nighteye's. Danger Sense is screaming at him, and it's so loud he doesn't know how he can be the only one to

hear it. Static settles over his skin, cloaking him.

"If you were in my shoes, and you knew what I knew, would you do it?" The exhausted teen rubs the pads of his fingers over the scars on his arms. "Would you take the treatment?"

Nighteye leans in close, and Black Whip and Deflect together form a writhing black barrier just in time to prevent his index finger from jabbing into Izuku's chest.

"Now, when I remember All Might's future, I see him die, and then I see *you."*

Stunned into silence, Izuku is backed into the nearest corner, hyperventilating. Here it is his turn to become the hare caught in the cage.

"You are there. *Each. Time.* It is not All for One who gets to All Might; it never was. It was always you, Midoriya Izuku."

At the very height of the painful crescendo in Izuku's skull, he faintly registers hot liquid trailing from his nose and dripping down onto his jacket. Red lightning zips around him, waiting and ready.

It is probably the only time One for All will ever come to his aid again without his direction first.

Izuku doesn't know how to defend himself. Is there even a way to? He hasn't a clue what to think, so how is he supposed to go from here?

Tomorrow, when Izuku wakes up, he will find his mother and ask her to take him back down to the park where he saw his first villain fight. The same park where he played and laughed with Katsuki, the one with that hill overlooking the city where lilies of the valley grew.

The more pressing matters lie in what this means for All Might. Nighteye said he told Yagi about the future he saw back then, so is that the *disagreement* Gran said they had, which caused their split? Did Yagi hear he would die and forge on, uncaring for how his friends would feel on the matter?

When Izuku blinks back to the dreadful present, he sees, looming behind Nighteye, a monstrously large and wispy version of All for One himself. His white stare glares down at Izuku as if to say: *Isn't it just like I told you?*

The boy regains his footing and forces Black Whip down. “No,” he says, but even to him it sounds tinny. “No. I won’t let him die.”

“Foresight is never wrong. When I see death, it is set in stone. I cannot change that future like how I can when I dodge a hit I had foreseen. It is not even close to the same thing.”

Izuku hears the ridicule in Nighteye’s declaration and moves past it anyway. *“No,* there are ways to go around it. Foresight won’t be able to predict accurately if a—a time-altering quirk is involved, because that’s an uncontrolled variable. Foresight would have to only base things off the linear flow of time, so if there’s a quirk out there I could harvest that goes against that, we could—”

“I do not need you to tell me how my quirk works. You think I haven't tried every possible path? Every outcome? Even the *illegal* ones?” Nighteye, despite his anger, backs off a little, his eyes following the steady stream of blood flowing from Izuku’s nose. “You are not the only one with contacts all over the globe.”

“Just because it hasn’t happened to your knowledge yet doesn’t mean it’s impossible! You—You can’t just stand idly by and let bad things happen. We—”

“There is no *we.* Overhaul is our only connection, which will dissolve immediately after he has been dealt with.” Nighteye points to the window, his face shadowed. “Now leave.”

Izuku stares up at him, lost for words. There’s no way Nighteye is just going to leave the conversation at that! He wants to ask more questions, like why hasn’t All Might told anyone? Does he truly believe the future is unchangeable, or is he just not concerned about it? Why does Nighteye feel so firmly he cannot change the future once he has seen it all the way through? And why is he still so fucking *bitter?*

More than anything, though, Izuku is scared. Standing before a hero who likely wants to kill him and *would* for the sake of preventing the future he fears is coming, the boy has never felt so vulnerable. This sparks the biggest question yet: why is Nighteye not attempting to put him down right now if he believes that Izuku will be the one to end All Might?

Does he know he wouldn't win against Izuku? Does he not actually believe what he sees? Is he scared? Resigned?

Or perhaps it's that All Might is the only barrier stopping Nighteye from taking care of Izuku himself.

He will not desert his mother, he promises to the sky, sitting here in this cramped office in front of his wretched doctor and listening to the receipt for his death. He will not desert his family.

When Danger Sense fades to a quiet hum, Izuku pulls himself together. He holds his nose tightly, staunching the blood flow as best he can.

"When?" He whispers, and the miserable question drags some uncertainty out of Nighteye's otherwise stony expression. There's a crack there, and Izuku holds onto it like it's hope.

Tomorrow, Izuku will do none of what he said. For how selfish would it be to reintroduce himself to his mother and invade her quiet lifestyle, only to rip himself away from her soon after? What kind of son would that make him?

"He has months now, at most. That's the time I could narrow down."

Ice floods his lungs and pushes out all the air in one painful wheeze. Izuku's back hits the wall, and his eyes squeeze shut, terrified now. A sense of urgency overcomes him and nearly knocks him off his feet, because All Might cannot die first. He doesn't want that. If he goes first, One for All will die with Izuku, as the boy will surely not have enough time to pass it on before he succumbs to his sickness. At least if Izuku dies first, some of One for All's embers will return to All Might and allow him to choose another successor, perhaps the one Nighteye wanted in the first place.

Or maybe even Kacchan, for the teen wouldn't take it if it was given by Izuku directly.

"Sir," Izuku starts again, voice wobbly like it was after his apartment exploded, "we can—"

Nighteye whirls on him. *"Out!"*

The doctor opens his mouth, almost says something. Almost. The rest of Izuku's life may have turned out differently if he had, or not. When there are no more words left to be exchanged, the man rises to his feet and opens the door for him.

And so Izuku leaves with new wounds inside his chest.

Heaving over a recently cleaned toilet during lunch is something no student wants to be doing. It's happened so often to Izuku now, though, that he's become quietly resigned to it. At this rate, he should marry this toilet.

He ate one bite of salmon this morning and had to excuse himself from the table to throw it up. It was then he knew it was a liquids-only kind of day.

He didn't talk to Hizashi or Shouta about it, even when they asked him. He also didn't talk to them on the way to school. In fact, he convinced them to let him walk here by himself to get an early start.

Izuku knows how irritating this must be: the ups and downs.

He just can't sleep, and he also can't eat without taking ten dramamines. It's past noon already, but he can't stomach anything from Lunch Rush today.

He's been queasy all day, and a sudden heat flash hit him during second period. He's sweating so much he can't even grip the sides of the toilet correctly because his skin is slipping against the porcelain. His curls stick to his forehead, making his sensory issues even worse.

Fuck, he has so much shit to do. Hawks hasn't gotten to him about the approval yet, as it's still pending. This annoys him, but there's nothing he can do. Nighteye has been silent since yesterday, just as he figured he would be. And on top of that, the Club is demanding more appearances from him. He has to approve more transits in person today after school, and he can't just have Kaida do them this time. God knows she's already been carrying half his load lately.

All Might won't be back from his trip to I-Island for another few days, which is both good and bad. Izuku has a feeling that Sir Nighteye told Principal Nezu and Gran Torino of his suspicions regarding Izuku's role in All Might's apparent death—so it's not so out of the realm of possibility that his master is already aware of it.

But if he is, why hasn't he said anything? Why hasn't he been more wary of Izuku?

He was so close to blurting out the truth to Shouta last night when he came home that he had to literally clamp his hands over his mouth to shut himself up. He's aching to tell someone, as he can't deal with this shit all locked up inside. He has another session with Hound Dog tomorrow, but is that kind of topic important enough to force the counselor to tell someone?

Would it even matter, since Izuku also thinks that Detective Tsukauchi was told about it, too?

Another thing that's weighing on his mind is that he was rude to Snipe-sensei in the teacher's lounge this morning.

The man was only commenting on his disheveled appearance, making light jabs at him and his baggy eyes—though, looking back on it, they were all coated with concern and care. Izuku snapped and shoved his hand off his shoulder, saying he was *great* and didn't need the man to bother him about it.

It's just like that morning he snapped at All Might. Izuku is trying to fix himself, but he doesn't know why he's so fucking *moody* lately.

Snipe thankfully backed off with only a raise of the brow and a nod, his palms up soothingly, but Hizashi was not so understanding. The blond stood up from his desk and took Izuku by the ear, leading him out into the hallway where he could chew him out privately.

Izuku apologized profusely, of course, and he still feels horrible about it. He was so overstimulated, so *overwhelmed* with the clashing emotions inside him—ones that have been building up over the past few weeks at least—that he couldn't help it.

It's like it wasn't even him talking.

He shudders, gripping the toilet even tighter as his stomach heaves up whatever bile he has left. In addition to everything else, he's worrying about the midterms coming up. Even though he's going to leave UA after the exams, the school is already making plans to implement a dorm system for the hero students and select other departments. All associated teachers will have their own dorms near their classes—that is, if everything is approved by the state and the students' parents.

He heard the teachers talking about it this morning. With Power Loader and Cementoss' help, the dorms could be done in a matter of days once the green light is given. If this happens, it means Izuku would be coming *with* Hizashi and Shouta to live on campus even after

not being enrolled.

Sure, he'd technically be in the teacher's dorms, but he'd still be *here*.

Another bout of nausea overtakes him, and he coughs up globs of white foam. He wipes his sleeve over his forehead, only to heave again into the bowl. Red, sticky mucus comes out, splashing into the bowl, and he grits his teeth at the disgusting, copper taste at the roof of his mouth. He flushes the toilet for the nth time in as many minutes.

He's coughed up brown mucus before too, and he doesn't know exactly what it is. He'll have to ask the doctor at the Club once he comes back from his work trip.

When the dry heaving won't stop and the itch under his skin only gets greater, Izuku fumbles across the tiled floor for his bag. He takes out his pill bottle and shakes a few out, barely able to think straight.

"It's not your fault this time," his father says calmly, and Izuku's first reaction is not his best one, he'll admit. The bottle goes flying in the direction he vaguely heard the voice, and the cap pops off easily, sending pills scattering all over the floor like beads.

"Shit!" Izuku hisses, scrambling out of the stall to pick them up. "Shut up!"

All for One drawls on. *"Why do you care what that foolish man thinks of you?"*

"Shut up, shut up—"

"That's so tiring."

"Shut the *fuck up!"* Izuku grabs the pill bottle so quickly that it breaks with the pressure. Plastic shards imbed in his palm and clatter to the floor, echoing in his head.

He stares at the even bigger mess he made, fists clenching the fabric of his pants. The accident pulled him from his downward spiral, though, forcing him to take a second and calm himself down.

Hound Dog's words come to the forefront of his mind, and he closes his eyes, trying to clear his obsessive thinking.

You can't control what happens around you, or what people say to you,

the counselor told him at their last meeting, *but what you can control is how you choose to react to it.*

It's something Izuku has heard countless times before, but somehow hearing it from Hound Dog forced him to reconcile with it.

When Izuku has calmed down significantly, he continues the tedious task of picking up each individual pill. Now that he has no container for them, he has to stick with his pocket until he can grab a bag from Lunch Rush.

Right now, Izuku just needs a few seconds to himself, and he'll be okay again. But the universe won't allow him even that, apparently.

He feels them before he hears them. Slight panic makes him work faster, but he can't locate the last few pills. They probably rolled under some of the stalls, so he'll need to use Black Whip to sweep them out quickly from—

The door is pushed open, and Izuku freezes like a *very* suspicious person.

Kirishima's spiky red hair comes into view first, but Kacchan is right behind him. When Kirishima sees Izuku, he stops talking with his mouth in a little *o*- shape, his eyes wide. "Oh, hey, Midoriya! Didn't know you used these bathrooms, too!" He flashes a sharky grin. "Barely anybody comes up here! It's sweet."

Izuku smiles back, rubbing his neck. He's looking anywhere but at Kacchan, who seems annoyed by Izuku's mere existence. "Hey! And yeah, I know, it's great!"

Kirishima tips his head as he walks further in. "Whaddya doing on the floor?"

Blushing a little bit, Izuku stands and waves him off. "Well, honestly, I just fell and— *ah, Kacchan, don't—!"* Izuku's voice turns high-pitched at the end when the blond bends to pick up a tiny object sitting by one of the stall doors. Izuku knows what it is without even seeing it, and all he can do is lurch forward and snatch it from his friend's hand before Kacchan can even straighten up.

The interaction happened in less than a second, and now both Kirishima and Kacchan are looking at him, the former with confusion and the latter with indignation.

“Yo, what was that?” Kirishima asks, looking back and forth between his two classmates.

Izuku shakes his head, high off adrenaline and the fact that Kacchan spotted an object that tiny within fucking *moments.* “It was just—”

“That was a pill,” Kacchan states, as if he doesn’t notice the blatant *what the fuck is wrong with you* expression on his childhood friend’s face.

There’s a tense silence between them, and Kirishima is the first to break it. “A pill? Are you sure, man? I wonder if someone dropped it.” He bends down, too, looking under the stalls, and Izuku’s heart fucking shrinks. “Woah, wait, I think I see a couple more! That’s crazy!”

He moves as if to pick it up, and Izuku quickly moves forward, blocking the boy’s reach. “They’re prescription!” He blurts, not even attempting to make up some other lie. The last thing he needs is Kirishima innocently bringing the pills to the principal to report them as drugs. Yeah, Nezu already knows Izuku takes these, but he still doesn’t want to deal with that.

Kacchan’s burning stare is so intense that Izuku can only glance at him for a second at a time.

“Huh?” Kirishima says.

“Sorry,” Izuku continues, trying to hide his skittishness. “They’re mine. I dropped them when I slipped and was trying to pick them all up, but they’re hard to see. That’s why I was on the floor.” As if to show proof, he holds out the remnants of the pill bottle from his pocket.

“Oh, okay! I can help you look!” Kirishima offers, moving to the side.

“No!”

The shout echoes in the room, making Izuku wince. Kacchan still isn’t saying a word, which just makes Izuku more uneasy.

He coughs. “No, thank you. They’re *really* high dosage. They’re for people with my metabolism, so I’m scared you might overdose just by touching them, even with your quirk. I can handle it!”

Kirishima, being the saint he is, just shrugs and nods in understanding.

“Alright, man! If they’re that dangerous, we should probably get one of the janitors to clean the floors since they touched them. Can never be too careful, right?” His red eyes flick between Izuku and Kacchan, obviously noticing the tension but choosing to not intervene. “I’ll go get someone.”

With that, he turns and jogs out, leaving Izuku with the one person he would really rather not be in the same room with right now.

In a move quicker than lightning, the pill is snatched back from Izuku’s hand by Kacchan, who then turns it over in his palm a few times.

“Hey!” Izuku protests, moving to get it back. “Didn’t you hear what I just—!”

“Overdose, my ass!” Kacchan barks, shoving him off. “You think I’m stupid all of a sudden, nerd? If they were that strong you wouldn’t be allowed to have it on campus!”

“That’s not how it—”

“What are they for? They don’t look like any I know.”

Izuku sours. “What, are you a pharmacist now?”

“Does teach’ know about this?”

“Of course he does!” Izuku retorts. “Do *you* think *I’m* stupid?”

“I’ve always thought you were stupid, only because you are—”

“What’s it to you, anyway?” The boy cuts off hotly. He didn’t realize that finally talking face to face with Kacchan here would cause him to only get more worked up. “It’s none of your business!”

“The hell it is!”

Izuku finally has enough and uses an air shot to turn Kacchan his way. Black Whip shoots out of his palm and takes the pill from his hands before going for the remaining few still on the ground. In a matter of two and a half seconds, all of the pills and remnants on the tile are safely inside Izuku’s pockets, where they will remain for a while yet.

“You’re not supposed to care anymore, so don’t pretend like you do!” Izuku hurls at him without much thinking.

Kacchan recoils. “The fuck is that supposed to mean? You think I’d waste energy on *pretending* to—”

“No! I didn’t—I just—!” Izuku growls and turns around, gripping his hair to ground himself. Kacchan always has a way of reversing Izuku’s progress, and it’s not even his fault. “Just go, please.”

“This is a bathroom,” Kacchan snorts. “I can go where I feel like it.”

Izuku rolls his eyes and storms off. Kacchan grabs his wrist tightly before he reaches the door, halting him. Izuku prepares to snap at him again and yank himself away, but when he sees Kacchan’s face, the words die in his throat.

His friend looks quietly determined with pursed lips and narrowed eyes—it’s an expression he rarely ever has, and it renders Izuku speechless.

The walls around Kacchan crack just a little, allowing more of his emotions to fill Izuku’s senses, and the boy is shocked by how much genuine regret and concern he can feel.

“You look fucking horrible,” Kacchan says, and his hand is still on Izuku’s bare skin. “D’you know that? Have you seen yourself the past few days?”

Izuku swallows down his frustration, left with nothing now but raw emotion.

“I could say the same to you,” he chokes out, but to them that kind of response is more of an agreement.

“Is it because All Might’s been gone?” Kacchan ventures. He blinks, eyes widening a fraction now. “He’s okay, isn’t he?”

The brief change in subject makes Izuku relax more. “He got kinda hurt on his last assignment, but he’s fine. Of course he’s fine, Kacchan.”

Well, Izuku thinks saltily. *Not for long.*

“So, then what is it?”

Izuku turns to him fully. “What do you mean?”

“Why do you look like such shit?”

Naturally, Izuku is tempted to make a joke or some curt redirection, but Kacchan's intense gaze stops him from doing so. "Nothing. It's just been a weird week," he murmurs.

"Don't bullshit me," Kacchan argues. "If it was just that, you wouldn't be in here all alone throwing up your guts."

Izuku starts. "How do you—"

Kacchan lets go of Izuku then. "For one, I can smell it. For two, you have the edge of the damn toilet seat imprinted on your neck." His face twitches. "Which is gross, so wash your fucking face before I drown you under the tap myself."

He shoves Izuku towards the sinks, and the boy dutifully uses the soap to scrub his arms, neck, and face. Hizashi and Kayama would scream at him for using regular hand soap for all that, but what they don't know won't hurt them.

"They just cleaned this entire bathroom," Izuku mutters, ears turning red. "I was the first and only person in here afterwards."

Kacchan leans against the wall with his arms crossed. Izuku's eyes linger on his bulging muscles for longer than is socially acceptable, though Kacchan has never really seemed to mind.

"Whatever," the blond dismisses. "Now answer my question."

"Which one? You asked a few," Izuku replies cheekily, hoping to further lighten the air between them. Their relationship has always been rocky and based on the moment. Things change on the flip of a dime.

"You're sick, and you're off your game. You also fell during the class warmup run this morning. Something has to be wrong. Spill it."

"Okay, well, first of all, it's cold out. You know I don't like running in the cold." At Kacchan's meaningful glare—and the prospect of Kirishima returning soon—Izuku answers him seriously. "It's just been a lot of things, Kacchan, and you and I both know we don't have the time to discuss it."

Not here.

"Why not? You don't think it's worth it?" His words, though deliberately even, pierce Izuku's heart.

“No, of course it’s not that, I just…” Izuku averts his gaze, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He wonders how many different ways he can word his thoughts without making it seem like he’s mad. “I’m… I’m sorry for how I treated you, uh, the last time we spoke.”

Kacchan looks away from him too, then. “It’s fine.”

“This—this past week has kinda, like… made me realize a few things, maybe.”

“Like?” Kacchan demands impatiently.

Izuku shrugs. “Like it’s better if you stay away.”

The blond thinks over the response for a moment before kicking off the wall and frowning. “Do you think it was easy or something for me to bite my tongue this whole time? You think that me ignoring you only hurts *you?”* His gruffness makes his tone lower than ever before, and it kills Izuku to see Kacchan’s hand fall back to his side after he just lifted it up to reach out to him. “I… Deku, I’m…”

“No, it’s alright.” Izuku crosses the distance and holds his calloused hand against his, happy that they at least haven’t reverted so far back that physical touch is off limits. Izuku speaks slowly and lightly. “You know, I just really hate doing this to you.”

Izuku watches the way Kacchan’s throat moves in time with his deep swallow. “And I hate seeing you like this,” Kacchan mutters, squeezing Izuku’s palm with the heavy admission.

“You don’t have to be here. I… I don’t want you to be here if it ruins your—”

Kacchan huffs. “I can make my own decisions. I don’t need you or anyone else to patronize me and how I live. I can learn how to better balance myself.”

It sounds like a promise, those last few words. Izuku searches his friend’s gaze for something he doesn’t know the name of yet, and he thinks he finds it, because his chest stops aching.

“I’m glad,” he says, with nothing else to say.

Kacchan doesn’t let go of Izuku but does look away once more. “So, what happened?”

Izuku hangs onto the rough edge of his words, feeling as though he's floating through the air, and promises to tell him tonight about his trip to Sir Nighteye's agency and his plan for Overhaul.

He makes his own promise to himself that says he will also reveal to Kacchan what Nighteye said to him. If he won't tell Shouta or Hizashi, he should tell his best friend. Maybe he'll have better ideas on what can be done. He hopes they can push their last heated spat away for the time being to focus on the present.

For the moment, they stay in that bathroom together until Kirishima comes back with some cleaning supplies he was lent from one of the passing janitors. Of course, the janitor refused to clean the bathroom for the second time in the same hour—which Izuku never expected them to in the first place.

Begrudgingly, they get to scrubbing, even Kacchan, and Izuku keeps that same small smile on his face the whole time. Lunch will end soon, so he'll have to get back to class and hope he doesn't have anymore flare ups like this, but right now everything is just fine. He smells Kacchan's rich cologne, and he realizes just how much he missed being so *close* to it.

They work beside each other a few times, and their closeness doesn't bother the two of them at all. Kirishima doesn't seem fazed by it either.

He is so relaxed that when Kacchan bumps into him and doesn't immediately jerk away, he doesn't notice how the blond slips two fingers into his pocket and takes out one of the many pills inside. Perhaps if he wasn't so emotionally exhausted, he would've felt it. He would've sensed the light deception hanging on Kacchan's person, vaguely hidden in the air.

But with Kacchan beside him, touching him again, and Kirishima happily chatting with them and laughing, Izuku is warm and safe, and that's what matters.

And an hour or so later, when he goes to the rooftop to catch his breath and blow off some steam, he catches a hardened red feather shooting towards him at around two hundred miles an hour.

It's a good thing he's paying attention, isn't it? Danger Sense didn't seem to detect any malice from it, so Izuku wasn't alarmed.

He looks at the blackened edges and tears on the feather. It's a calling

sign if he's ever seen one before—and so obviously, too. Izuku waits for a moment, then lets out a brief sigh of relief. At least now things are looking up. He flicks the feather back in the direction it came from and watches as the wind and some other force picks it back up and sends it on its way to its owner.

Izuku feels something dark settle in his stomach. He thinks it's curiosity and determination rolled into one, but he's not quite sure.

All he knows is that he doesn't have to wait for permission anymore, as Hawks has sent his confirmation.

Chapter End Notes

> sometimes when i reread a chap after editing i realize just how much yapping i do. when will i learn to cut out all the word vomit? science still can't answer
>
> hope this chap makes sense. turns out that two bottles of champagne makes words come out easier
>
> u

revisiting you

Chapter Notes

> sry for the wait. college is kicking my ass. i have determined that logic and proofs is in fact not logical or even worth proving. neither is philosophy. i am a rational person. questioning everything is exhausting and seems too repetitive to be of any substance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re early,” Kaida remarks, labeling new jars of her poison. The common area is empty save for a few people drinking or exchanging information, so Izuku doesn’t feel so overwhelmed this time when he walks inside. It’s never packed at the Club when there’s still some light out.

“I have plans later,” Izuku explains, heading towards the large office that used to be reserved for Council meetings but is now entirely his. She follows without preamble.

“Certified vigilante plans, or personal plans?”

Izuku only shrugs in response before picking up the box that was left on the desk. “Is this it?”

Kaida leans against the wall, jaws unhinging in a yawn. “Yeah. Before he left, he said he wanted you to have it in case you needed it. Wouldn’t tell me why, but he said you’d know when the time comes.” She crosses her arms over her head and watches with diamond eyes while he opens it. “Careful, y’know. It’s fragile.”

“I can read,” he says with a good-natured eye roll. It’s not like the word *FRAGILE* is written in messy sharpie fourteen times all around the otherwise unmarked box or anything. The doctor is very emphatic when it comes to his things.

Inside, carefully lined up in a row on a stainless steel tray, are three tubes of thick liquids. There are labels wrapped around each of the glasses, and the characters are in the doctor's familiar scribbled handwriting.

He isn’t familiar with the name of the drug, but Izuku is not stupid. He’s had conversations with the doctor before about the projects he’s

been working on in secret. And it's so very obvious what Izuku has before him now.

He runs his fingers along the edge of the box, not wanting to touch the tubes yet for fear of breaking them. "These are…"

"His best versions," Kaida finishes. "That's what he said, at least. He hasn't fully tested them out, so you have to be careful, but since he knew he might be gone for a while he insisted you have the leftovers of the batch he prepared."

"And these are for sure the last ones?"

"I'm assuming he took the other ones with him. For us, though? Yeah, these are the last." She smiles a little, all teeth. "You're holding a box worth about a hundred and ten billion yen."

Sucking in a breath, Izuku steels himself and picks up the one on the far left. He stares at his faded reflection, brows furrowed. It's amazing how much work has to go into making these kinds of miracle drugs when there are some rare quirks out there that can do it instantaneously.

Izuku puts the vial back down. The liquid brings back dark memories, but he blinks them away. The ability to bring back someone who has just died, at least in the situations the doctor has tested it in, shouldn't be a power put in any one person's hands, but the circumstances here grant the heroes no other choice.

"Who else knows?" He asks, soft like the way the light above falls on Kaida's shimmering skin.

"No one but us." She tips her head forward. "The member he used as a test subject in the beginning rounds died in one of the ambushes that happened a week ago, so I guess we won't have to worry about that. Not that I ever did, though."

His fists clench. "Yeah, I guess not."

She stares at him, nonjudgmental. "It wasn't anyone's fault."

I know.

He swipes his bangs back and pulls out a hair clip to keep the hair off his forehead. "Well, we need to figure out what to do with them. They can't stay here, so we better divide them up." He pushes the box

towards Kaida. “We should keep one at our safe house for emergencies —it’s still secure, and I redid the alarms the other day for extra protection. It’ll be safe enough for now.”

She nods in agreement, kicking off the wall to grab the middle vial. She places it in her inside jacket pocket where it won’t fall or be seen.

Izuku stares hard at the remaining two. “I think you should carry one on you at all times since you’re here more often than I am. Besides, you’re on the front lines for most of our missions. It’d be stupid for you to not have one on hand.”

“And the last one?” She asks.

Hesitating, Izuku shakes his head. Danger Sense doesn’t like being around these vials for some reason, and he’s inclined to listen to the silent warnings. He wants to leave already. “Do whatever you want with it. Keep it wherever in case of another attack. I honestly don’t—”

A scale catches on the back of Izuku’s hood when he turns to walk away. He’s yanked back around, and he blinks at Kaida, unimpressed. *Seriously, how hard is it for mutants to just use their—*

She takes the last vial in the box and presses it into his palm.

Izuku’s eyes blow wide. “I don’t need—”

“Not for you,” she says, eyes piercing. Her diamond pupils glitter. “For someone who might need it. For the future.”

The boy holds her gaze, his stomach giving a funny *swooping* feeling. He grimaces after lifting the tube up into the light. “I…” He chews on his cheek. “I’m not sure this is the right way to go about this. It’ll be in better hands with you.”

“He wanted you to have all three, but I know you’d never go for that, so at least take one. Knowing him, he’s doing this for a reason. If you want to argue, take it up with him when he gets back.”

Izuku shivers. The doctor is not someone to argue with. It simply does not happen.

He feels the cold glass between his fingers, mind overloaded.

“I see him die. And then I see you. It was always you.”

Can’t Yagi be saved? He shouldn’t die in the first place. *Izuku* is the

one meant to die. It's an unchangeable fact. Nothing can be done, and Izuku is getting closer to accepting this sentence quietly with each passing day. But for that to happen, All Might needs to live, so Izuku has to make sure he will.

That's his duty. Both as All Might's *successor* and All for One's son. That's what he's meant to do.

And maybe this will help if he fails.

Izuku gingerly sets the vial into his jacket, zipping it up and keeping it close to his chest. "For someone who might need it," he agrees, tongue heavy with the words he won't let out.

"For emergencies," Dragon Lady reiterates with a half shrug.

Izuku has never liked being the judge, jury, or executioner, but for this it seems he'll have to be all three. When he makes for the exit, already running on a tight schedule, she calls for him one last time.

"Something came in for you a couple of hours ago," she says casually.

"I'm not a fan of packages."

"You'll like this one." She doesn't wait for a reply before using a scale to hand him a manila envelope. It's thick, probably four and a half inches wide at the center. Rectangular.

Izuku freezes when he touches it. He's been in enough deals to know what it must be. His eyes slide up to hers. "From who?"

"Who else?" She says, and she has a sort of triumphant gleam to her expression. Poison drips from her horns and onto the ground. "You didn't actually think the Board would come back, did you? They left as abruptly as they did because they knew all this shit would go down, and they didn't want to be the ones to sort it all out this time. They knew all of this would happen the very moment they assigned you to Overhaul. They were banking on it, actually." She picks at her sharp nails. "Last night, the head stepped down, and the others followed."

"They backed out." Irritation hits Izuku so sharply it nearly knocks him off his feet. "What, they think I don't know what I'm doing?"

"No, they know you've got it. They gave you permission to do whatever you wanted when they named you the head of this region, didn't they? And they knew things would change dramatically because

of it. By letting you take more and more control and allowing you to get the Commission on our side, they're giving us a fresh start."

Izuku grips the envelope tight, nostrils flaring. It doesn't really set in at first what she says, but he can't find it in himself to give a shit about the Board members anymore. He can understand why they suddenly disbanded—it was probably to do away with any bad blood between them and the Hero Public Safety Commission's council, but *still.*

"They could've given us a warning."

She makes a negative noise. "To the rest of us, it was always clear what they were going to do. Even the seniors said that the Board allowing you to take refuge here after Stain left was the first real warning. And now look," she says with a smile, "your first big boy paycheck."

Izuku drops the envelope on the desk, lips curled up. He doesn't care for the money, which is a weird thing to admit. Just some months ago he might've fucking *killed* to get his hands on this much cash, mainly so he could afford Missy's food and buy better materials to make more reliable weapons, but right now he can barely look at it.

It hurts to think that he wasn't just holding an unfathomable amount of money but also the goddamn rights to the *entire* Underground Club.

He is fifteen years old and has been fighting hard to keep himself alive whilst attempting to use his skills for the good of others, and the organization that made it all possible for him is now his. He has fought with them and *for* them for nearly four years, each night and every day.

If he told his eleven year old self the very floors beneath him would be his in the future, he would be laughed at.

Izuku doesn't think it's very funny in his current shoes, however.

"What do they expect me to do?" He asks softly. "I don't have a lot of extra time to devote here. Maybe back then I could've done it, but things are different for me these days."

I have… people to come home to now.

Dragon Lady isn't worried, and for once she doesn't crack a joke.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think you’ve been doing a good job so far. ‘Sides, you know we’ll always be here to pick up the slack.” She’s fidgeting in her pocket, and Izuku knows she wants to light a cigarette right now. “I wouldn’t be much of a champion if I didn’t step up when needed.”

Izuku studies her and says nothing at first. She may vehemently announce her distaste in heroes and the government in general, but there is no mistaking the heroic qualities inside her. Being trained as a young girl for years to become a professional hero leaves a lasting impact on the brain.

He’s sure some part of her wishes things could've ended differently. Perhaps Hawks and the Dragon Lady would have become partners instead of adversaries as they are now.

Regardless, there is little to say of the situation. Izuku hides a similar smile in his jacket when he manages to leave successfully this time.

Kaida will know to divide up a portion of the cash Izuku refused to take and give it to the members who may need it. Anything leftover can be used to fund the Club’s missions and supplies.

He wonders what Shouta will say when Izuku tells him about his newest promotion. It’s a scary thing, really, and Izuku knows it’s probably less than ideal, but it’s a feat still, and he hopes the man can be proud of him for it.

If Izuku lets his mind wander far enough, he can pretend he is a hero and that the Club is his agency. What would that make Dragon Lady? Certainly not his sidekick. Izuku thinks of a younger All Might and Sir Nighteye and determines that heroes can still have friends within an agency, so maybe that’s what she would be.

Indulging in this childish dream for a few more moments, Izuku doesn’t react to the biting chill that greets him when he leaves the building. He only feels warm.

Kacchan is coming over to the apartment for the first time in a few hours, but before he does, Izuku makes sure to stop at the pizzeria. His curfew for tonight ends in half an hour, so he has to keep an eye on

the clock. His heart just feels too full somehow, and his skin is stretched too tight. He doesn't want to go home like this, and coming into this part of town usually helps make things feel less bad, so here he is.

Under the darkening sky, he sees her at the front of the store through the windows, tidying up the place and cleaning as she always does.

She's speaking aloud even though she's the only one there; Izuku can see her lips moving. She always talks to herself when no one else is around. Izuku understands better than anyone else, of course, so he's never judged her for it.

Ms. Hanako waves her hand and shakes her head at times in response to whatever she's hearing, and at one point she's silent for a good twenty seconds before laughing heavily. She moves slowly throughout the store—gingerly. It's as if she's hurt somehow. Her ankles are swollen, as Izuku can see them just slightly from under her flowy dress. And even from this far away, he can see how she tremors badly.

He hugs himself in the cold outside. If he pretends he is someone who has not known her for a few years now, he would say she looks almost *old.* To Izuku, she looks older than he ever remembers noticing, though. Wrinkles adorn her soft face, and dark lines tell of her experience and time on the earth. She has dark spots, moles, and skin tags littered about, and her blue cotton candy hair looks less blue and more gray now.

How did he never notice before? Time has passed before his very eyes and he was there for it all, yet it still comes as a shock.

Izuku worries his bottom lip, and in the dark shadows of the trees above him, he takes off his mask, face tucked under his hood. He debates walking inside, smiling at her, asking her if she needs help for food prep tomorrow, just as he always used to do before he started doing third rounds of patrolling back then.

God, when was the last time he's done that with her?

A car passing by lights up the area in a soft glow. Her head lifts, eyes flicking to the windows she spends so much of her time cleaning.

She does not see him there, hidden away in the shadows, and Izuku hates that he's disappointed by this fact. When she gets back to work, moving much more slowly than before, he closes his eyes and turns

away.

He will let her continue to speak uninterrupted to the things she sees and hears. He knows how irritating it used to be when someone would accidentally talk over one of the past One for All users, so he doesn't want to do that to her.

There's always next time.

Izuku meets Kacchan halfway.

Mitsuki wanted to drive her son over, and Hizashi likewise offered to pick him up and also drop him back off after Izuku and him were done hanging out, but Kacchan refused both options.

Izuku didn't get it at first, but now he does. It's nice to be able to unwind with your friend first before having to come into the house owned by your teachers. Besides, the two of them need to be alone together. Even though Izuku has his own room in the apartment, there's little privacy.

"That's a hell of a way to drop shit on someone," Kacchan remarks as they walk the rest of the way to Hizashi and Shouta's apartment.

Izuku huffs. "It's like they threw the cash at me hoping I wouldn't be upset."

"Well, I can see why they thought that," Kacchan snides. "You always look kinda poor."

Izuku stops in his tracks. "What? Even today?" He frowns. *But I washed my hair this morning. Is it not noticeable?*

Kacchan ignores the question and continues on brashly. "What a buncha losers, anyway. Couldn't even tell you to your face."

"They're probably scared to come back. It's already dangerous enough as it is for everyone else at the Club, so they don't want to take the risk."

Kacchan's red eyes flick over to him. "What're you gonna do now?"

"What do you mean?" Izuku gestures lamely with a hand. "Not much I can do. No one else wants to take their place, so it's just me and a couple of other champions taking over. If I refuse, everyone's fucked."

"How're you planning to manage the Club and the Commission at the same time?" He asks in a slightly lower tone.

Izuku looks away, mood depleting. *Well,* he wants to say, *it'll be easy to do once I leave UA.*

Kacchan hears the silent words, as he looks off into the distance too. "Oh," he says flatly, irritation spiking the air around him.

As if to make up for it, Izuku gathers his strength and leans into his friend's side, his next words barely a murmur. "Until then, though, I guess I'll just have to figure it out. And I hope you won't mind it if I bounce ideas off of you sometimes."

Kacchan doesn't answer, so Izuku straightens back up with pursed lips, leaning away when the touch between them begins to burn more than it warms.

What do you expect me to say, Kacchan? Izuku thinks. *I'm sorry. I don't know what to do anymore.*

Izuku looks at his boots as he walks. He is aware of the vial sitting imposingly inside his jacket with each step he takes. God, he just wishes Kacchan would look at him the same way he did ten years ago that summer when Izuku could pretend everything was okay. Izuku wonders if Kacchan misses him—and that's the tragedy of it: Izuku is right here, he never left, yet Kacchan still knew a younger version of him once and then lost him. Sure, the blond got what he wanted from Izuku now, but things aren't the same.

When the faint blaring of car horns in the distance becomes too much for Izuku, the boy sucks in a breath and goes another route. "You know I wouldn't leave you behind, right?"

"You say that now."

"I don't think there's anything in the world that could force me away from you," Izuku whispers.

Kacchan gives him a sideways glance. "What about your bastard old

man?" He asks with a roll of the eyes.

"Not even him."

He gets a rough grunt in response. "Is that right?"

"Yeah." Izuku flashes him a smile, all soft and cheesy. "We're still going to be heroes together. That's not changing. We've still got our dream, and nothing's gonna keep that from us."

"'Course not," Kacchan drones, eyes closing as he tips his chin towards the darkening sky. "We're the strongest."

Aren't we?

When they make it to the apartment, Hizashi is the one who greets them when Izuku unlocks the door. He's wearing jeans and a sweater with his hair pulled back into a neat bun.

Izuku wonders briefly if it's jarring for Kacchan to see his teachers looking so informal.

"Yo! Come on in, listener!" Hizashi welcomes his student in happily, keeping the cats back with his foot. "Make yourself at home. I hope it wasn't too chilly out there! You know I wouldn't have minded driving you over."

Kacchan only grunts, but he does dip his head respectfully and switch shoes upon entering; Hizashi made sure they had a pair ready for him.

Shouta is in the kitchen fixing tea, if the sound of the mug cabinet opening and a kettle being filled means anything.

"Teach," Kacchan says first, meeting his gaze through the archway.

"Bakugou," Shouta responds. "Mind the cats, they'll scratch."

"He's lying," Izuku interjects, scooping up Meatball and presenting him to his friend as if he's the next Messiah. "They're all sweethearts for the most part."

Kacchan holds up a hand and screws up his face. "Don't care. Where's my Missile Launcher at?"

"What do you mean *yours–"*

As if being summoned, Izuku's bedroom door creaks open when Missy

darts out from inside and zeroes in on Kacchan from the hallway. She crosses the distance between them in just two seconds and claws her way up the blond's legs to perch on his shoulders.

Izuku huffs and resolutely ignores the smug grin Kacchan gives him, deciding that Pickles and Meatball are much better company. Sushi is busy sitting on the top cushion of the couch behind Hizashi, watching the scene unfold with cloudy eyes. Perhaps Izuku should be more like Sushi.

Missy is excited, to say the least. She hasn't seen Kacchan in ages, and Izuku can at least recognize that Kacchan gives the best chin scratches, so he can't be too jealous.

They make it to Izuku's room for some privacy after talking more with Hizashi about unimportant things. Being a radio host, Hizashi is skilled in the art of talking and figuring out just what to say to get people more comfortable. And it seems to work with Kacchan too.

"A lot more decorated than I expected," Kacchan says, surveying the room.

Izuku closes the door behind him and for some reason feels embarrassed. "They wouldn't let me keep it bare. Said I should make it more… *me.*"

Sure, Izuku has been in Kacchan's room loads of times, and he even sleeps in the same bed as him most of those instances, so in all senses he shouldn't feel self-conscious about showing such a private part of his life—not when Kacchan has done it.

But when was the last time Kacchan was in *his* room? When has Kacchan ever been in a room that Izuku calls *his?*

He hasn't in a long, long time. Not since they were both three or four years old and had no worries for their future. Kacchan never went to Father's facility for obvious reasons, and Izuku never let him in his abandoned apartment complex.

Maybe he's embarrassed that now he finally has something that's only his, and now Kacchan has the chance to see it.

"Oh, it's *you* alright," Kacchan snorts. He looks at the All Might posters hung up on the ceiling and walls and then reaches carefully for one of the limited edition action figures on some shelves. "This one was mine. I gave it to you after your eleventh birthday."

“I remember.” Izuku looks down at the floor where Missy is watching Kacchan curiously. “It’s not the same one, though. It burnt up with everything else back at my old place. So, sorry, I guess.”

Kacchan’s brows furrow. “How’d you get your hands on another one?”

“Principal Nezu got it from an auction in Otheon.”

“Figures.”

“You can have it if you want.”

Kacchan turns to him with a weird emotion tugging at his skin. “I don’t want your shit. Keep it.” With that, he sets the figure back down and continues to inspect the room. Their classmates don’t seem to realize that Kacchan is actually one of the most nosy people alive. He eavesdrops at any chance he can get, and he enjoys finding out every little detail of something. Izuku has grown accustomed to it and never argues, as he’s the same way.

Except Kacchan reaches for the door of his closet after looking at everything else in the room, and Izuku panics upon remembering what exactly he has in there. He squeals and quickly gets in between Kacchan and the door, waving his hands in front of him. “Nope! Not for your eyes!”

“Hah? Why the fuck not?” He tries to shove him aside, but Izuku remains a brick wall. Kacchan’s face turns leery when he notices Izuku’s beet red cheeks. “Got some embarrassing shit in there?”

Izuku, thinking of the various charcoal portraits he made of Kacchan throughout the last month alone, smooths his expression down drastically and folds his arms, lifting his chin up. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Kacchan thankfully doesn’t push. He sprawls out over Izuku’s bed, putting his palms behind his head for support. Izuku just watches him for a moment, trying to get over how weird it feels for Kacchan to be here, in his room, in *his* bed. Did it feel this weird to Kacchan when Izuku first came over to his house for a sleepover? Did he even care? Maybe for Kacchan it wasn’t any different than all the times his other elementary school classmates would come over to his place.

Izuku skin prickles in irritation at that idea.

Kacchan’s loud huff breaks him out of his thoughts. “It’s gonna be so

fucking weird at school now that I've been in their house."

"Yeah, imagine how I felt coming back after having to start *living* with them."

"Don't act like you weren't excited about it."

Izuku shoots him a glare. "I was never excited. He literally kept me locked up for a week when I first got here—"

"Deserved."

"—just so I wouldn't escape, remember? And it's not like I really had a choice in the matter when they—"

"Yeah, yeah, shut up," Kacchan brushes off. "It was either here or my house, and obviously this was your first choice, so I don't wanna hear it."

Izuku makes an incorrect buzzer noise. "If I went with you guys, then I wouldn't have been able to do my vigilantism since Auntie would actually have a reason to know where I would be at night."

"And you thought you'd have a better chance sneaking out *here* than you would at my place?"

"Well, I don't have to actually *sneak out* anymore, since Sensei kinda lets me go out when needed, so *technically* you could say that this was my master plan all along and that I actually made the best decision in —" Izuku gets a mouthful of fabric when Kacchan throws a pillow at him. Izuku throws it back without preamble, and Kacchan lets it drop to his chest when it ricochets off his face.

Missy stakes claim over it immediately. She launches herself onto the pillow and tucks her paws beneath her, entirely content on her new throne. Except she makes Izuku feel better about himself when she scratches Kacchan after the boy tries to use her close proximity as an excuse to pet her.

But even this display is not enough to calm the thrumming of anxiety beneath Izuku's freckled skin. He watches Kacchan lecture Missy and doesn't say a word. His gaze falls to Kacchan's lips, memorizing the way the edges of his lips curl up in irritation while he speaks. Izuku counts the tiny scars on his jaw from explosions that strayed too close to his face as a child.

He then looks at his hands. He can see the shiny callouses even from where he's still standing. If he thinks hard enough, he can remember how each one of them feels against his own hand. He misses the feeling.

Izuku sits on the side of the bed, looking somewhere past the wall in front of him. "I lied to you before. About All Might."

Kacchan's red eyes flick towards him. "What?"

"When you asked me if All Might was alright," Izuku explains, rubbing his left wrist. His arm is numb once again. Perhaps it will never get better, just as the doctor said. "I lied."

The blond sits up, hands nestled in Missy's long hair. "What are you talking about?"

"He's not fine. He won't be, at least." Izuku uncurls his fists and studies the burn scars in the indents of each of his palms. "He's supposed to die in a few months."

The silence that stretches between them burns, and for a moment neither of them are heroes in training or students in a high school. They are two young boys who used to jump up and down in front of a comic book store with that old television inside the window, clutching two exclusive cards of the Number One Pro Hero *All Might* in each of their dirty hands.

They didn't know what they had then, and Izuku wonders if there'd be a point in going back to that time at all. He doesn't want to, though, not when he knows what he does now, and maybe there's a point in that too.

Kacchan sounds the quietest he's ever been when he replies, and Izuku regrets that he has to tell him any of this. "That's what Sir Nighteye said?"

"Yes."

"Could he be wrong?" Kacchan asks, and Izuku hides his tight, *bitter* smile at the fact that Kacchan recuperated faster than Izuku did when he first heard this.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? You'd always argue with me

about the logistics of foresight quirks before, so why is this any different?" Kacchan moves closer, voice breathy. "It can't be any—"

"Because it'll be my fault this time," Izuku says, figuring that if he admits this to anyone, it'll have to be Kacchan. It could never be anyone else, really.

It's quiet in Izuku's room save for the sound of his fan blowing on his nightstand, so Izuku can hear what's going on down the hallway. He hears his teachers talking to each other in the living room. He can hear the muted sounds of people shouting on that old television show that Hizashi likes. The cats are running around, too, if the hissing and scrambling has anything to say about it.

The world outside of this room is unaware of the dreadful secret he's handing very gently to his best friend. And Izuku will work to keep it this way for as long as possible.

Kacchan rolls his eyes. "And how do ya figure that?"

"I didn't figure anything." Izuku breathes in, remembering how it felt to stand before Sir Nighteye as these words were being thrown at him like knives. "He saw it. And he said it would happen because of me."

"You?" Kacchan scoffs, but his expression is humorless. "What, he thinks you could kill him or something? Please. If that senile old man thinks you could do anything to All Might even if you wanted to–"

Izuku forces himself to turn so he's looking his friend in those beautiful narrowed eyes. "Not by myself, Kacchan."

The blond gathers what he's picking up quickly. "You mean… All for One?"

Izuku swallows hard. "It's what he said."

Kacchan searches his empty expression. "And you believe him?"

"It's his quirk."

"That doesn't mean anything."

"To him it does," Izuku whispers, and the words fall between them like fresh snow.

"Did he even tell you exactly what he saw? What if he saw something he didn't understand, or that he didn't quite get the first time? Didn't

you tell me that his quirk–"

"I don't really get a choice in whether or not to believe him, Kacchan. All Might is supposed to die, and Nighteye said he sees me there, right beside him, each and every time, with my father alive and well at the end." Izuku scratches at his neck. "He just–he just seems so *sure* of it that I… I don't know what I can do."

"Easy. Let's say that asshole's visions are even a *little* bit true: the only thing we gotta do from here is make sure it doesn't happen."

The words are said with such a natural cadence that Izuku is momentarily confused as to why he ever thought otherwise. If Kacchan can be this sure, doesn't that mean something? Doesn't that–

We, Kacchan said, not *you.*

Heat blooms inside Izuku, and the boy tips his head. *You're supposed to be far away from me, you know. We shouldn't be like this anymore. I'm not good for you, and you're not good for me.*

But Izuku doesn't want to give Kacchan up. Maybe before Sir Nighteye told him about his visions, Izuku could've done it. He could've pushed Kacchan away and ignored him just as the blond was doing to him. It would've been hard, but not impossible. Never impossible, not when it comes to Kacchan's safety.

Izuku would do anything, hurt anyone, if it meant Kacchan would be spared.

"How do we do that?" Izuku asks.

"We prevent the situation leading up to it from occuring in the first place. Whatever it is, it's changeable, right?"

"What if we can't?"

"Then we prepare to fight harder than we did in those stupid ass visions. Why are you even asking this? We won't lose. Not if it's that important."

Izuku glances away and decides not to tell his friend that he wasn't in Sir Nighteye's vision at all. He's terrified by those implications.

"Hey, boys!" Hizashi calls from the living room in a singsong voice, and Izuku makes for the door after wiping his face. But Kacchan grabs

his wrist and easily pulls him back, still sitting on the edge of the bed.

“This isn’t going to change anything, is it?” At Izuku’s confused frown, Kacchan continues, this time a little more harsh. “You’d never hurt All Might, even if someone tried to force you. You’d find a way around it even if it killed you.”

The words go high at the end, as if it’s *almost* a question.

Izuku gives a small smile. “I know that, Kacchan.”

“Do you?”

Izuku opens his mouth, but Hizashi calls them again, and this time Kacchan doesn’t stop him.

Despite Kacchan’s adamance that things will turn out better than they think, he acts weird in the hours following Izuku’s confession. After watching a couple of movies and gossiping with Hizashi about students in other classes, Kacchan and Izuku take a walk in the cold.

They don’t say much of anything at all, but they don’t need to. Sometimes, it’s enough to just be by each other.

But even then, Izuku can tell that something is wrong. Kacchan is glum, and his eyebrows are turned up in a way that tells Izuku he’s upset over something he feels he can’t control. It’s not a look he often sees on his face, so noticing it now makes him feel worse about what he said to Kacchan earlier.

It’s dark out by now with the only light being the partially covered moon high above. So, really, Izuku isn’t all that surprised when Kacchan huffs something soft after they finish talking quietly and says he’s going to head home.

Izuku pauses in his tracks. “You’re not going to stay for dinner?”

Kacchan laughs. “And eat whatever shitty cooking teach will scrounge up? Fuck that. The hag made spicy chicken, and I’m not passing up those leftovers.”

This pulls a laugh from Izuku. While Hizashi and Shouta are surprisingly good cooks, Izuku doesn't blame Kacchan. He wouldn't give up Auntie's spicy chicken for anything either. "They make good food, actually. Mic's the one that cooks my lunches, you know, and you said you like most of what's in my bento every day." He shakes himself. "But I get that it's already late for you. I guess we're just, uh, used to staying up late with all of our weird schedules here, so I forget that most people are in bed by now. I'll see you at school?"

"Yeah."

Before he loses the will to, Izuku moves forward to pull his friend into a hug. It's quick, and it's maybe too lightweight to not be awkward, but Izuku knows Kacchan is never usually one for contact, so he didn't want to stress him out by lingering for any longer.

Hell, Izuku isn't usually a fan either, but he thinks they both needed it this time.

"Goodnight," he says after clearing his throat and pulling back.

A hand lifts out of Kacchan's pocket to wave him off, and the streetlight shows Izuku the newfound redness to the boy's cheeks. Izuku watches him walk down the sidewalk until he disappears around the bend of the street. He stuffs his own hands inside his pockets, keeping his fingers warm. He can smell the lingering scent of Kacchan's earthy cologne, and he breathes it in deeply as the cold sets deep into his bones.

He stands there for around thirty minutes more with his eyes closed, tracking Kacchan's quirk until he feels his friend make it safely back to his house.

The wind bites at him and freezes his freckled cheeks, and Izuku doesn't move from his spot until he finds the will to.

It's cold out, sure, but Izuku figures he could be colder.

Shouta is in the mood for something savory tonight, so he's cooking dinner this time. He also wants to surprise Hizashi since he knows it

was a long day for him at the studio, which is why he's making miso salmon.

It's one of Hizashi's favorites, but neither of them have had time to make it in a while. Shouta figures he should fix that.

He gets out the pans and ingredients and gets to work. They're about out of the miso paste, so he makes a note on the refrigerator to get some more the next time they're at the store. He sets the avocados off to the side after glazing the salmon and is cutting the stringy ends off the fresh green beans when he decides to finally speak.

"Bakugou didn't want to stay?"

Izuku doesn't answer immediately from his place on top of the fridge. He is curled up as he always is, eyes barely open as he surveys Shouta and the room. It took a minute for Shouta to notice him up there upon entering the kitchen. Another minute to hear him.

Impressive, though not surprising at all. Not anymore.

"He's usually in bed by now, so he wanted to head back early."

Shouta accepts the explanation with a nod and continues his preparation. "Dinner won't be ready for another half hour, but can you set the table?"

Izuku slides off the fridge and obeys, but Shouta shakes his head when he sees Black Whip emerge from his palms. The kid is using it to take out the plates from the cabinet and set them neatly on the table.

"No quirk usage in the house," Shouta warns, checking the rice cooker to see how much rice they have left from the day.

"It makes it quicker," comes the childish groan from the other side of the archway.

"Yeah, and it also increases the likelihood of accidents. Need I remind you what happened last time?"

Hizashi pipes up from the hallway, "He's got a point, listener!"

Izuku, who is no doubt remembering how he broke a glass just the other day upon losing control of Black Whip, concedes with an irritable sigh and continues setting the table like a normal person.

He comes back into the kitchen to watch Shouta cook, which used to

be something that mildly annoyed Shouta, but nowadays he can't care less. He might, dare he say it, even like it when the kid does this. He hopes Izuku will learn better this way.

When the fish is nearly done baking, Shouta takes the first leap of the week. "When you were living with your father, who cooked?"

Izuku doesn't hesitate, as it's become a thing for them now to ask each other disconcerting questions at the most random of times. Shouta has been trying to get as much information as possible on Izuku's home life, and since he can't exactly ask Hound Dog for any insight, that means he has to ask the boy directly. It's all good in the end, as Inui told him it'll encourage Izuku to open up without prompt in the future —as long as he does it right and doesn't fuck up, that is.

So, Shouta remains vigilant throughout the entire conversation, keeping his ears open for any sign of excessive discomfort from his student.

"Kurogiri. He, uh, he also tried to teach me sometimes when he had the extra time."

Shouta forces himself not to react even though his mind stirs in interest at the mention of the warp user. Out of all members of Izuku's family, Kurogiri is probably the one he talks the least about. "Did he like teaching you?"

"He said he never minded."

Shouta uses the rest of the butter in the container and fluffs up the rice a little, letting the silence hang in the air while the question stews. He's testing how far he can go here, remembering Hizashi's words from a month ago.

"He's not happy with me right now," Shouta grinds out in irritation, swiping a sweaty palm down his face.

Hizashi punches his shoulder and smiles with all his teeth. "It's 'cause you're still super unapproachable. Try connecting with him, Sho. Come on, I know you can do at least that."

It's ironic to Shouta how this stuff somehow feels easier to navigate only after he and the kid beat the shit out of each other that day in the school hallway. Perhaps it was a necessary evil.

"You know," Shouta begins, "Hizashi's mother actually taught me.

Whenever he would drag me over to his house after school, she would call me to the kitchen to teach me something new." He speaks slowly, focusing mostly on the work before him. There's no response from Izuku, so he keeps going. "I used to think she would get annoyed at me because of how many times I messed up, but she never minded either. I think the best teachers are the most patient."

"She taught Hizashi, too, right?" At Shouta's nod, Izuku continues with an awed edge to his voice. "She must be really talented. Everything he makes is delicious."

"Don't tell him that. His head will get even bigger."

Izuku laughs, and it's warm and bubbly and bright. "You're just jealous he's a better cook than you."

"You shouldn't say that to the person currently cooking your dinner. Might accidentally burn it." He raises a challenging brow at him, but the boy just squints back, having been subjected to it too many times to be affected.

At least he's not in one of his *unhinged* moods tonight, as Hizashi calls it. Shouta doesn't think he's awake enough to indulge him in that.

As time passes, Shouta finds he can't stop recalling the days where he would be at the Yamada household and be clothed and warm and fed. God, he was probably at his worst back then, both mentally and physically, as he was always sick. Hizashi's parents likely saw that things weren't quite right for him, and that's why they constantly asked their son to bring Shouta over more often.

Shouta takes the next leap, lifting his chin a little as he stirs the glaze he's making. "Maybe sometime we can take you to see them."

"His parents?"

"They live a few cities over, but they like visitors. I think his mother would enjoy someone like you to talk to."

He can hear the kid thinking hard and *feel* his eyes burning into the back of his skull. Was that too far, Shouta wonders? To ask him if he's okay with meeting Hizashi's parents? Maybe Shouta shouldn't have even suggested it knowing how Izuku's homelife was back–

"That'd be nice," Izuku whispers, hugging his knees.

Shouta closes his eyes in relief and nods curtly as acknowledgement.

“What about your parents?” Izuku asks then.

Shouta stops in his tracks, a crease forming between his brows. *They didn’t even want me in the first place, so what would they say about me bringing a kid of my own to them?*

His parents were never *cruel.* Shouta wouldn’t say that. They just weren’t always present, and they left Shouta to take care of himself most of the time. It’s why he’s as independent as he is. Sure, it hurt, but he was always aware that others had it much, much worse. And the longer he taught high school students, especially ones like Izuku, the more he realized just how true that statement is. He would never–

Shouta blinks. *A kid of my own. A kid of* my *own.*

He shakes his head, desperately needing a nap. He finishes up with the glaze and sets it off to the side to cool a little before meeting Izuku’s eyes for a brief moment. “I think you should stick to meeting Mic’s first. They can be a handful.”

Trust me, kid. They’ll love you at first sight.

“Oh, got it.”

Shouta hopes he wasn’t too harsh in the shutdown, but he can’t let himself mull over it. He wasn’t going to lie to Izuku or give him false hope. The truth is, he isn’t sure he’d want to subject Izuku to having to meet his parents. If they’ll treat Izuku anything like how they treated Shouta when he was younger…

Well, maybe that’s not quite right. Shouta’s father did help him out with some stuff at times. He wasn’t as distant as his mother was. His father also approved of Hizashi—to an extent—while his mother flat out denied his existence in Shouta’s life. So maybe, just maybe…

“My father might want to meet you,” he says casually. “He was an analyst for police departments on the other side of Japan. He liked to talk about quirks too.”

Instead of perking up or being interested like he thought he’d be, Izuku just makes a low noise, his brows now downturned. “I don’t think I’d want to meet him very much if he was mean to you.”

Shouta freezes, staring at the backsplash on the kitchen wall. There

are sauce stains he needs to clean up; he never noticed them before. “What makes you think that?” He asks a little sharply.

“Dunno. Just how you mentioned him. Like he was… not so nice.”

Shouta’s teeth are gritted. He doesn’t even realize it until he manually has to unclench his jaw to respond. He’s never talked to anyone except for his close friends about his parents before, and for some reason the kid’s questions put him on the defensive.

He feels a spike of panic in the air and realizes just as quickly that it came from behind him, so he forces down his unexplainable irritation and tries to exude as much indifference as possible. “My father was never mean to me, kid. He was…” He struggles to find the right words, if there even are any.

“Not there?”

Shouta leans against the counter and crosses his arms after wiping his hands on a dish towel. “I guess you could say that.”

“That sounds like being mean to me,” Izuku mumbles.

“I don’t fault him for it.” *Not anymore, at least.* Shouta is content to leave the conversation at that, but then he senses some more confusion coming from Izuku’s form, so he tries his best to explain in a way that will stop him from asking more. “Izuku, some couples just end up regretting having kids. It happens, and it is what it is. Not much to do about it after the fact. I know my mother regretted it.” He breathes out fast. “But she, along with my father, still did their part in raising me despite…”

Izuku is looking down at him with something unreadable in his expression. “Not caring?”

“I was going to say not wanting to, but sure.”

Izuku mulls over this. Shouta’s been getting good at guessing what’s going on in the kid’s mind. At least, that’s what he thinks before Izuku opens his mouth up next and says, like some kind of sad fact, “Oh, so you’ve got mommy and daddy issues too.”

This time, when Shouta turns to stare at him, he does so slowly, blank-faced and silent, because what the *fuck* did he just say?

Izuku turns a deep shade of scarlet and scratches at his neck. “Sorry.

Inside thought."

"Right," Shouta says flatly. "And I don't think you know what those terms really mean either, so don't use them."

"What? Of course I know what they are! I used them correctly! It's when you don't—"

"Drop it, kid," he orders sourly.

Izuku huffs and obeys, but only for a few minutes. It seems the boy was largely offended by his assumption. He has his legs hanging over the edge of the fridge now, and his face is set in a pout. "I can't believe you think I don't know what they are when I'm literally, like, the best person to—"

"A hundred laps," Shouta commands, pointing with his spatula. "Go, now."

Izuku's mouth drops open. "Wha—but we're not even in school! You can't do that! Also, we don't have a track!"

"Around the living room then. Get started, or I'm doubling it. *Go."*

Groaning loudly, Izuku slides off the fridge and begins to jog around the living room, circling the couch and coffee table. Shouta hopes the mini punishment will help the kid blow off some steam. It's clear that Izuku was left flailing after Bakugou left, so this is needed. He pretends not to notice the boy switching between using Boost, One for All, and then no quirk at all after every five laps completed.

When Izuku is finished with the hundred, Shouta is done with dinner. He rinses off the dishes he used and puts them in the dishwasher, not starting it yet.

Izuku, who is now lying on the carpet face-first, grumbles, "This is cruel and unusual punishment."

"It sure is."

"Individuality is a crime in this house, I guess. Can't have any opinions. I can also apparently never be right."

Shouta takes the food out of the kitchen, his cat slippers making soft noises against the floor. "Mhm."

"Tyrant," Izuku mutters.

“Yes, I’m so mean.” Shouta sets the serving pan on the table and knocks his foot into Izuku’s side to get him up. “Now go wash your face. Dinner is ready.”

As Shouta waits for Izuku and Hizashi to rejoin him, he can’t help but wonder when exactly he started looking forward to eating all together like this. Before Izuku came into their lives, Shouta and Hizashi would only ever have dinner with each other around once a week due to their conflicting schedules. It was nice when they were able to finally sit down and just enjoy each other’s company, even if it was just in the privacy of their own home and not at a restaurant for a date night out, but that doesn’t mean Shouta was really *upset* they couldn’t do it often.

They were used to it then, so it never felt like a big issue.

But now that Izuku is here—has been for the past couple of months, to be precise—things have changed.

Now, shared dinners happen more often, and if Shouta is working late or on patrol, Hizashi has Izuku to eat with. Likewise, if Hizashi is stuck at the station, Shouta is still able to eat with Izuku.

The point is, they’re never really alone anymore. They all have dinner together at least three times a week, and Shouta isn’t sure when exactly he became so… *reliant* on them.

Family dinners were not a typical thing at his house when he was a kid, though they were for Hizashi. Maybe things have changed somehow.

He thinks of this non stop throughout dinner, and afterwards he finds himself going through his old texts with his parents.

It’s been a long time since he last messaged his mother, but his father texted him more recently—it was a few months ago, and he only mentioned some case he saw on the news that he wanted to ask Shouta about. He figured his son was responsible for apprehending the villain even given what little details were included in the report, and he only wanted to verify it.

It was something familiar, safe, and cordial. Neutral.

That’s how it always was with his father.

Shouta sits on the edge of his side of the bed, head hanging low as he

rereads each character of the last message like he has to memorize it before something bad happens. And after another half hour of hesitation, Shouta takes his third leap.

He texts his father first.

His fingers shake slightly as he scrolls through his camera roll, and he sends one photo to him.

It's from a couple of weeks ago, and it's a slightly blurry picture of Izuku, Hizashi, and himself. Hizashi is grinning smugly down at Izuku, who is leaning over to point a finger at the man's chest. He's sporting his own smug grin, too, but his expression is definitely much more vengeful. Shouta is a little off to the side with his legs crossed and a palm on his cheek, holding his chin up as he watches them.

A game of Monopoly sits in between the three of them with various bills and chipped hotel pieces scattered across the board—the aftermath of a scam gone wrong. Even with how blurry the photo is, the large, matching stack of bills and property cards on Hizashi and Izuku's respective sides are clear. Shouta's side is inexplicably empty.

In the background, soda and leftover pizza can be seen. This is one that Nemuri took of them in the living room one day while they were having a movie night. Shouta never knew she took it using his phone until he was searching his albums for something from work and saw it saved there.

He never did bring it up with Nemuri after the fact.

To his surprise, his father texts back a few minutes later. It's record timing, in all honesty.

is that a kid?

Shouta snorts to himself and waits exactly two minutes before sending his own reply: ***Yes.***

The man says nothing more for a stretch of time, but Shouta is used to this game by now. He distracts himself by folding laundry and putting in the next load until he gets the ping. It's one word, just how he always used to text: ***yours?***

Shouta stares at the screen for a while, stumped. His? *Does* he consider Izuku his kid?

Sure, he's his temporary guardian—caretaker on paper—and also his homeroom teacher, but that doesn't have to mean anything at all. It's like Recovery Girl told him that day: he can stand on the sidelines if he so wishes, and Izuku would survive somehow.

But is that what he's ever done? Is that something he'd ever want to do?

He looks up from his phone and focuses on the hallway wall. He hears Hizashi and Izuku talking to each other rapidly about the flaws in a new episode of some reality TV show, and he can't help but smile. When they brought Izuku home after the first time he went to the hospital, things changed. *Drastically.*

And while this stressed him out to no end at the beginning of all this, he also knew, deep down, that it was always going to be something permanent.

It seems Izuku is here to stay, and Shouta wouldn't want it any other way.

He texts back one word in response, just like they always do, and heads back out to watch the movie with his husband and kid. He shouldn't keep them waiting any longer, and he doesn't want to anyway.

It's a good thing, too, as Shouta will likely never have something like this again.

Chapter End Notes

> it may come as a surprise to some that aizawa struggles with hating someone he's supposed to love
>
> also, do you think ms hanako saw tsubasa hanging around izuku after hosu and felt grief?
>
> someone asked me a few weeks back why i insist on making this fic long and drawn out, and i didn't know how to explain to them that after hero's shadow is finished, there will be no content left to share of this izuku. he will have lived a very short life, so i want to make it clear by the end of this fic that he lived every minute of it anyway. the length is supposed to be long bc that is how his life will have felt to him at the end of everything :)
>
> f

beautiful only briefly

Chapter Notes

i am extraordinarily late! oh boy oh boy!

when the end comes around, remember that grief only means you have loved to the fullest

content warnings: extreme paranoia, violent hallucinations

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After months of letting her therapist touch her thoughts and be a spectator in her dreams, Inko is finally ready for a walkthrough.

Mukawa never let her consider it as an option until now. She would always say that Inko wasn't far enough yet in her progress to attempt something so mentally taxing. It was a decision made with Inko's utmost safety in mind, and Inko understands that.

They've been working together to search through her fragmented memories in little increments to organize and make sense of the unreal. The past few months have been harder than ever before, but Inko thinks determinedly that if today goes right, it'll all have been worth it.

"Most patients fail to see me once we arrive at the more taxing memories," Muwaka explains to her kindly. Her eyes are so, so gentle, but her words are firm. With her kind of quirk, she has to be like that, Inko figures. "And if at any moment you become scared or hesitant to move forward, that's alright too. You can back out whenever you feel the need. You only need to imagine yourself being pulled out, and I will do the rest."

"I won't pull myself out," Inko says, and Mukawa smiles.

"Most people say that, but all of them end up doing it in the end, even subconsciously." She leans back a little and lifts her chin. "And I have to tell you, of course, that I will pull you out myself if I think things are going too far. I'll be there right beside you, even if you don't feel it."

"You'll see it all?"

“I’ll see what you did.”

Inko lets a silent breath pass between her teeth, and she glances at her lap. “And if I do want to stop?”

“We can try again next time, or not at all. This is an invasive procedure by nature, and sometimes our memories are best kept hidden away from us. There are risks to this which I know we’ve already gone over in intricate detail, so I won’t bore you, but just know that this isn’t the only option.”

Isn’t it, though? Inko feels a sudden urge to argue, and this action in and of itself—this little act of courage—is indicative of something going right for once. She cannot remember the last time she felt so strongly about something.

She lives alone and has for years now, but she is only forty. Her apartment should not be empty. She should have walls decorated with photos. She should have another pair of shoes by the doorway. An extra room. One filled with posters and merchandise and other things teenage boys might like. The photo album on her phone should not be filled with only pigeons and rainy days and random goods she’s baked. She should have friends there somewhere. She should have someone else.

Why can’t she have someone else again? She can’t find what she found once, and she can’t live with that failure anymore.

She is so close to something changing for the better, and she swears if this opportunity slips by her this time she may just never be able to shoot for it again.

So, she closes her eyes, letting the drugs tug lightly at her, and feels Mukawa’s quirk wash over her.

With a desperation she cannot remember ever not feeling, Inko searches for the memories of him.

They come to her quickly and apologetically, as if ashamed for having not revealed themselves to her sooner. For years before this, trying to remember these events was like trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to make sense of something she only felt in her bones once and could not ever replicate again.

She was told the strongest memories will come first, oftentimes not in

chronological order, which is exactly where Mukawa's involvement helps. She can help Inko make sense of the unreal, of the forgotten. She can help order things to be manageable. So when Inko finds herself in the shoes of her twenty-three-year-old self, she is as prepared as she can be.

Stepping into the past at last is a feeling so indescribable that Inko does not even register it as a memory. She could not remember it before now, so for her, this is just her current reality. It feels like a warm shelter in a snowy winter, a place so comfortable and safe that she feels cheated by the fact she can only experience it again now.

She lives this fraction of her life all over again, finding no hope at all down the familiar slope.

It is sunny the day she first meets him.

They call her into work at the last minute to cover a twelve-hour night shift, and she has no real reason to deny it, so she trudges through yet another painstaking cycle before finally making her way home in the early hours of the morning. She is hungry, sweaty, and exhausted. The sun has just barely risen over the buildings around her, soaking the city in an orange glow. Workers are whisking past, ready to head to work at a time when Inko has just left hers.

She cannot recall why she agreed to go in. How many hours has she worked this week alone? How many? Nowadays her bed is always made because she has not had the chance to sleep in it. She lives to work, as she fears there is nothing else for her to do. If she is not working, she is at her little apartment alone, baking and cooking and sweating some more.

Wherever she is, loneliness follows, so what difference does it make?

The days are bleak, the sun shining only in muted colors. Every night she buries tears beneath the ground where her parents rest and waits for new life to grow in the morning.

It's the product of some cruel sort of joke on the universe's part, she thinks when a thief crashes into her and shoves her to the floor, yanking her purse from her as she falls. She is so tired she almost doesn't process it at first, but then the static in her ears subsides and allows her to return to her aching body.

She scrambles to her feet and runs after the man, hand outstretched. The crowds don't part for her, and she's shoving against the flow of

traffic, so it's hard to keep track of the thief. She shouts, hoping to draw some attention, and jumps into the street to have a better look.

He's running fast, and there seems to be no police or heroes in sight, so desperation takes over. She knows she shouldn't, she knows it's against the law and is punishable by up to thirty days in jail with a hefty fine, but she honestly doesn't have a choice. Her wallet is in that purse, along with all of her cards and IDs—including her work ID. If she loses that, she's screwed!

Her quirk tingles at her fingertips, and she focuses on the thief weaving in and out of the throngs of people. He's just about to leave her sight! He's going to *get away!*

The imaginary string forms with not a second to spare, and the connection is secured.

The hairs on her neck and arms stand up when she activates her quirk. For a brief moment, nothing happens, but then the thief freezes in place, still hunched over from when he was running, and writhes. He twitches, attempting to break free from her hold, and Inko grits her teeth while she uses her other hand to help keep him at bay. Her quirk was never meant to be used on large things—in fact, she was really trying to aim her quirk at just her purse—so it's definitely taking a toll on her right now. She's only ever been successful with objects as heavy as twenty pounds! She steps forward some, trying to get closer without breaking the connection, and the thief looks over his shoulder with wild eyes, searching for whatever is causing this to happen.

Just when his gaze meets hers, a loud horn blares beside her, and a truck flies past, honking the entire way. A tire splashes into a puddle and soaks her from head to toe, and the suddenness is enough to break her concentration.

She jumps out of her skin, heart pounding, and scrambles back to the safety of the sidewalk.

When she looks back up, the thief is gone.

Cursing, Inko runs forward again, attempting to catch up, but there are more people out here now, blocking her way. There's no use.

Inko doubles over and fists her pants, struggling to regain her breath. *Shit! I'm so stupid! Should've been paying more attention!*

She straightens up and scrubs her face, eyes squeezed shut. Her week

has gone from bad to worse, and she doesn't know what to do. Her phone is in her purse, too, so she can't even call the police! She'll have to walk all the way to the nearest station to file a report, not that it'll do anything. Purse snatchers in this part of Shizuoka are rampant precisely because nothing can ever be done about them. Unless there's a hero to save the day right around the corner at the time it happens, you're out of luck.

Inko sighs heavily and begins the shameful walk, her temples throbbing from quirk overuse. She just can't believe it. Out of all things that could've happened to her today, did it have to be someone stealing her most important possessions? It's almost like—

"Excuse me," a smooth voice says, and if it weren't for the fact the words came from *directly* behind her, Inko would've thought they were for anyone else.

She turns and immediately jumps back in shock, hand coming up to cover her mouth. Her dark green hair swishes, pooling over her shoulders.

A large man stands before her wearing a suit with no tie. He's tall—Inko wagers he's nearly seven and a half feet—and bulky. His velvet jacket looks almost too small for him with how his muscles bulge through it, but the fact that the fabric reaches his wrists tells her it's actually the right size.

Her eyes drag up, chin lifting, and it's like her body has a visceral, *physical* reaction upon seeing his face. He's clean shaven, his skin entirely smooth, and it's the eyes she notices next.

They're narrowed, a striking red. She would almost call them inviting if not for how dark they are. Curly white hair sits atop his head, a few strands falling above his perfect white eyebrows and putting emphasis on his square jaw.

Inko, with her eyes now as wide as saucers, can only liken this man to a Goliath incarnate. It's not abnormal to see people like this, especially not in this day and age where genetics and quirks have changed the national averages for every physical characteristic a human can have, but never before has someone of this stature managed to make her lose her breath like *this* one.

She feels her cheeks heat up, and it's only when the man lifts up his hand more that she notices what he's holding out to her.

“Oh, my purse!” Relieved beyond comprehension, Inko takes it and presses it against her chest, finally able to breathe again. She bows low once, twice, and can’t stem the mantra of *thank yous* falling from her lips. “How were you able to get it?” She asks in shock sometime in between all of her words.

“I saw him running,” the man explains simply. “I’m faster than most, so there wasn’t an issue in catching up.”

Inko is about to respond when she notices a few red droplets on the side of his jaw and neck, with some matching splotches staining the collar of his dress shirt. Is that *blood?*

“God, are you okay?” She quickly takes out a napkin from her purse and reaches up to hand it to him. “Did you get hurt? You didn’t have to do that! Really! I appreciate it, but that was—”

“It’s not my blood,” he says, declining the offer. Inko blinks, taken aback, but the man only shakes his head with a small laugh before he explains. “He tripped and hit the corner of the alley. He did it to himself.”

The explanation soothes her sudden worry, and she wrings the napkin in her shaking hands. This time she’s not scared, however. She’s nervous for an entirely different reason.

People move around them easily despite the rude blockage; Inko suspects it has something to do with the sheer size of him. Who would dare approach him and order him to get out of the way?

She’s still staring at him and hasn’t said a word, but the man doesn’t seem to mind. Instead, his lips pull back to reveal perfect teeth. “Even if he could have hurt me,” he promises, “it would have been worth it for you.”

Immediately, Inko is stunned into silence, an *embarrassing* noise leaving her throat. She coughs and laughs simultaneously, her hand going back to cup her mouth while she looks away. When was the last time someone flirted with her? Or even so much as showed interest? Sure, she gets a few compliments here and there from people on the streets and even on the job by her patients, but she knows those are rarely genuine. Most men are looking for something else when they approach her that way.

But even still, it’s been months. Maybe even over a year. She’s worked so hard lately she’s forgotten all about that stuff.

“Oh, thank you,” she says, and she cringes when she hears the words come from her mouth. She doesn’t remember how to play this game, but all she knows is that she can’t keep this dumb smile off of her face. “You’re really too kind. Is there anything I can do for you? Do you need some money? It’s not a lot, but—”

He pushes her hand away again, gentle even for such a big man. Something warm settles under her skin at the faint touch. “No, I’m alright, but that’s very generous.” He dips his head. “I’ll leave you to get back to wherever you’re going.”

He walks past her, continuing with the flow of the working people in Shizuoka prefecture. He takes great care to move around her so that not even the side of his jacket brushes against her.

It is as though, even while walking in the opposite direction, he sees her.

She doesn’t know why, but in the seconds that pass between them, decades of regret mount on her skin. Why is she standing here? Why is she frozen?

Inko should check her purse to make sure all her valuables are there and then get going. There’s no point in lingering around.

But when she tries to force her limbs to move away, headed in the very direction the man is not, she finds it is impossible for her to do so.

She needs to get out of her comfort zone. She cannot keep living such a recycled life. Everything is rinse and repeat, and she just cannot stand it anymore. Mitsuki keeps telling her to find someone to hold onto and lean on. She has already found Masaru, and they’ve been engaged for a few months now—it is Inko who is behind. She’s out of college and has a decent albeit straining job, but more than that, she is alone.

Sometimes the silence of her apartment absorbs these pathetic feelings of hers like blood soaking into cotton. She is so achingly lonely that she feels it physically, like a soiled clump of dirty rags against her chest.

She cannot unlearn the feeling, but maybe if she tries she can bury it.

The universe is against her, not that she knows it. The wind whips at her face, begging her to let him go. Dead leaves fly in the space before

her, covering the eyes and mouths of every person walking past her. Thunder strikes somewhere in the far distance, warning of a morning storm and something far more sinister, and Inko crumples the napkin in her hand, ignoring it.

She turns around, and when she sees him just a short twenty feet away, still towering over the people around him, she takes the leap.

And this small bit of courage, this tiny moment of vulnerability, changes the course of so many lives.

“Wait!” She calls, and the covered stars overhead weep in response. Rain pricks at her skin, making her feel cold. It is only by thinking of him that she becomes warm.

He glances back, red eyes glittering, white brows stark as they lift up. “Something wrong?” He says, and somehow the words carry clearly to her ears despite the loud thrum of rain.

She rushes forward to meet him, shoes striking the puddles on the concrete. “I—I wanted to know if you’d like my number!”

He stares at her, expression unreadable, and Inko is prepared for the worst, prepared for the rejection, but she is pleasantly surprised when he answers in a smooth rumble. “I’d love your number.” His eyes flash teasingly. “Could I also have your name, too?”

She starts. “Oh, shit! Yes, that’s right. Sorry, I'm Inko!”

He shakes her hand, and she takes note of how large and warm his palm is, which causes her to shiver. The grooves of his hand fit into hers perfectly. “Hisashi,” he says, following her trend by giving his first name. “It’s lovely to meet you, Inko.”

Something about the way he says her name makes Inko hopeful. She gives him a scrap paper page with her number on it, wanting him to be the one responsible for texting first. She’s embarrassed of course, but now she feels a little more confident at least.

He takes it happily and is on his way, and Inko doesn’t think she’ll ever get that damn smile out of her mind.

That night, she dreams of him. The next night, too.

He doesn’t text her until a full week after the purse thief incident, and by then she’s already well into thinking she was rejected. He asks if

she can join him on a date, and she happily obliges. She's elated he didn't forget about her! Inko can forgive the lateness if it means she has a chance.

And for one slicing second, alone on her bed, looking at his enthusiastic texts to her, only her, Inko is not lonely.

The first date is traditional. They meet up at a nice restaurant, and it's wonderful, really. Inko doesn't think she's talked so much at once since, well, ever. He doesn't seem lost for words, either, which only fuels Inko.

She never knew she had so many things to say.

The second date is more casual, and it happens the next day. Sitting together at a cafe and laughing over stories about work and life, teas and honey buns in hand, Inko finds herself already planning for next time.

They do every kind of date imaginable: they go to the park to walk around, they have a picnic, they go to an art and music festival, they paint ceramic mugs together, they go see some geeky old movie that Inko has been waiting to watch on opening night—they do *everything*.

And somehow, the spark doesn't die out. It only grows. The heat within her is now a raging fire, a reflection of his overwhelming quirk. She feels fresh, she feels *alive*.

Somewhere in the middle of it, Inko forgets they're dates at all. The more they see each other, the more it seems as though they've known each other forever, and the faster they move.

Inko doesn't like to waste time. She's glad Hisashi doesn't either.

When she first told Mitsuki about Hisashi, Mitsuki was all for it. She was *ecstatic,* and she encouraged Inko to go for him and *not* let him go. But when they're finally able to meet just over a month later, something changes.

The meeting itself goes great! They go on a double date to a local restaurant which also has a mini golf course in it. To Inko, at least, it seems like Hisashi hits it off immediately with Masaru and Mitsuki, but it isn't until after that she's told otherwise by her best friend. Mitsuki calls her the morning after and admits rather hesitantly that Hisashi felt *off*. When asked why she thought that, Mitsuki can't provide Inko with a good reason. She doesn't even have an example to

give of something Hisashi did or said that could make her feel that way.

"It's just a gut feeling," Mitsuki says, her voice quiet, as if pleading to be heard and not taken the wrong way.

Inko isn't sure what to say in response. She thinks she loves this man even though they've only known each other for just short of two months. They've gone on so many dates and they talk so *often* that Inko just can't for the life of her understand why Mitsuki would feel this way. Inko is typically extraordinarily good at seeing through people's bullshit, so she doesn't think she's blinded by her longing or emotions, but *maybe,* she reasons, *just maybe I could be wrong. Maybe I'm just not seeing it.*

So, fearing she may be making a mistake of some kind by being with that man, Inko listens to her best friend and pulls back after another couple of months pass with no change. Somehow it's the hardest thing in the world for her to do.

Hisashi, as respectful as ever, notices her sudden distance and doesn't push. He only waits. And this makes Inko want him more.

"He really makes you happy, huh?" Mitsuki says to her one day when they're out together doing silly things.

Inko, busy scrolling through her old text messages with him, startles and shoves her phone back in her pocket. "Sorry, I was—"

"You don't hafta apologize." Mitsuki brushes back her spiky bangs and turns away. "And you know, you don't have to stop seeing him because of me."

Inko lurches forward. "No, it's not because of that! I told you, I was just—just kinda losing feelings—"

Mitsuki waves her off. "Oh, bullshit. It's obvious you're still obsessed with him." Her gaze flits away. "I shouldn't've said anything to begin with. If I knew you'd drop him because of it, I wouldn't have—"

"No," Inko states firmly, grabbing her friend's hand. "I care about what you have to say. I don't want to be around someone that makes you uncomfortable."

"You didn't like Masaru at first," Mitsuki points out.

“That’s different! I thought he was—”

“Inko,” Mitsuki interrupts with an exasperated sigh. She twists to face her fully again, red eyes gleaming with intensity. “The point is, things’ll probably change. I told you how I felt about him after *one* interaction. I can’t judge someone based on that alone.”

“Yeah, but what about the other three times we all went out? How did you feel about him after those?” The blond only pops a brow and narrows her eyes, staying silent, which makes Inko cross her arms. “See? So you can’t say it was just a one time thing.”

“I think you care a little too much about what I—”

“You would’ve left Masaru if I didn’t eventually start liking him,” Inko says. “You can’t say anything about what I’m doing when you’d—”

“You’re losing weight again.”

Inko freezes. “What?”

“You look pale because you’re probably not eating as much of the healthy shit you used to, and you’re always so distracted. You’ve taken up more hours at work again and we barely talk.” Mitsuki presses a finger to her chest. “I’m not blind, ya know. When you started seeing him, it’s like you actually started to care about things again. But now that you’ve stopped, you’re going right back to shit.”

Inko’s shoulders rise defensively. “That’s not true. I’ve been—”

“Look, you still like him, and it’s not like he’s actually done anything wrong for me to doubt him. If being with him is what it takes for you to take care of yourself, I’ll support it with everything I’ve got.” She smirks when Inko doesn’t seem convinced. “And I can’t lie, y’all look good together. It’d be a shame to let such good genes go to waste.”

Inko rolls her eyes. “I’m trying to be serious with you.”

“I am serious,” Mitsuki reassures, and she playfully shoves Inko’s shoulder. “I want you to be happy. And if happiness is when you’re with him, so be it. I’ll still be here beside you.”

Here, Inko hesitates, torn between two sides. If there is one thing her mother taught her, it is that she should always, *always* trust her gut. *Especially* when it comes to men. But her mother never told her what to do when the gut feelings are coming from someone else, someone

whom she trusts.

Mitsuki is not jealous, and she has no ulterior motives for telling Inko she is uncomfortable around Hisashi, so it's not like she's lying or making things up just to separate them. If the gut feeling is right, there must be *something* about Hisashi that is making Mitsuki's internal alarm go off.

But what?

Inko thinks she loves this man, and though it wouldn't have been easy, of course she would have stopped seeing Hisashi altogether if only to make Mitsuki worry even a little less. They've been best friends since forever—Inko can't even remember when they met! They grew up nearly side by side, inseparable! She'd do anything for her.

But the problem is, Inko is so scared of her own bleak future that she does not see Mitsuki standing right in front of her with open arms, just as always, ready to catch her when she falls.

Without Hisashi, Inko will once more have to deal with that lonely, aching feeling inside her chest, and she will have to return to that empty apartment of hers again and again and again and *again.* She cannot bear it, not that she would have told Mitsuki this.

No, Inko would have killed herself quietly, little by little.

And so it is perhaps both a blessing and a curse when Inko asks with tears in her eyes, "Are you sure?"

Because Mitsuki only smiles again and seals Inko's death warrant when she answers, regret already piercing her heart, "I always am."

So, after a year of dating, Inko and Hisashi move in together. Living with him is so surreal, so impossibly *perfect,* that Inko does not notice him carving his name into her side. She calls him soft and gentle, and she is not paying attention.

The memories fly fast by this point. They are mere flashes of love and warmth, but Inko has no trouble keeping up.

Hisashi's throat glows in the dim light of their shared room one night. He unhinges his jaws and allows for his firebreath to leave his mouth and settle on his hand. He holds it out to her, his gaze never leaving hers. "Alright, now focus on it. The trick is to visualize the entire thing as being smaller than it is. Feel the heat energy, and think only of

that."

Inko's face screws up in concentration, and her fingers tingle when she activates her quirk. She does what he suggests and feels a slight tug, but the connection between her and the fire breaks soon after. It barely looks to have done anything at all.

"It's one unit," Hisashi adds, and he moves closer to her so he can move her hand himself. "Hold your fingers out like this instead. It might help your control."

She swallows and tries again, pushing away her doubts. She's never been able to manipulate any kind of liquid or gas before now, but Hisashi has convinced her that it can certainly be something she can learn. But this is a great challenge for her, as what's more troubling is that fire is technically neither of those things: it's a visible result of combustion between fuel and oxygen. So, while it's impossible for someone like Inko to use her telekinesis on the fire itself like those with pyrokinesis can, she *can* potentially use it on the heat energy or the oxygen fueling the fire to either extinguish the flames or direct the movement of it.

"Get a little closer to it," Hisashi says, moving her hand forward. He smiles. "The outer tips of my fire are rather cold, remember? It won't burn you."

It happens quickly, in the blink of an eye. The strings form, and it's like something loosens inside of her. The fire jerks toward her, leaping off of his palm, and she moves away with a yelp, shocked. She ends up shoving herself against Hisashi's side, who is laughing heartily now.

It's the first time she manages to get it right, but it won't be the last, because Hisashi loves helping her expand her skills. They work at it together happily over the course of a few months, and soon her control over his fire turns near master level.

"Imagine the shape you want, and let your palms do the talking for you," he reminds her in a rumble, and Inko is in front of him now, already working on it.

With seemingly no effort, the fire contorts with its desire to follow the densified oxygen she's moving around. A dragon appears out of the green, its tail swishing animatedly with how the flames crackle and flicker. It's small, but the horns and wings are undeniable, and Inko lets out an unexpected laugh at the sight.

Hisashi does too. He flips his palm around so the dragon is prancing on the back of his hand, and the green glow lights up his face.

“You like it?” She asks teasingly.

“It’s perfect,” he says, and he’s only looking at her. She meets his eyes through the fire, and then her gaze falls to his lips. She stands up on her tiptoes, and he leans down to meet her halfway.

His lips feel like a home she doesn’t quite remember but ought to, like the stuffed animals that are shoved in the way back of her closet, the same ones she’s had since she was a little girl. Back when she used to hold them and love them each and every waking moment.

Hisashi is a busy man, but when he does have time alone with her, he makes it count, and she loves every minute of him.

He comes home bloody from work one time. She asks him about it, and he tells her that some idiot closed the door on him hard when he was about to leave. When she questions if the man apologized, he only chuckles, and she doesn’t know any better here, so she laughs with him.

He asks her a couple of times over the course of three or so years to get married, and she denies him each time. It’s not because she doesn’t love him but rather because she loves him almost *too much* that she hesitates for so long. It’s just too good to be true and everyone knows it. Mitsuki, despite staying true to her word and supporting Inko and Hisashi’s relationship as much as she can, tells her to keep waiting, to keep figuring things out.

Just in case.

So again, Inko waits. But she can only deny herself for so long.

When Hisashi asks her again, she accepts. They get married in the winter following the engagement. He likes the cold, and Inko really doesn’t mind it because he makes her warm no matter what the season is.

It’s snowing on their wedding day. The sun isn’t out, and to Inko, everything is much more beautiful covered in powdery white. Things appear so sharp and real.

She takes his last name, and finally things make sense.

She stirs awake to the feeling of him getting out of bed. She's tired, but she actually has the day off today. He's been encouraging her to stand up for herself at work and not be afraid to use her days off. She used to feel bad about ignoring calls to come in, but nowadays she doesn't.

It's nice to not have to worry about needing the extra cash, too.

In all senses, she should be sleeping in, but instead she blinks the blurriness from her eyes and watches him. It's early in the morning. The sun hasn't even risen.

A light glow permeates around his large figure like an ethereal outline. It's soft enough that it wouldn't have woken her if she was still asleep. It's a product of his fire breath, he once told her when she asked about it. He uses it as a way to see in the dark.

The covers slip off of him, revealing wide shoulders and muscled back. Thin white scars litter his skin, and Inko wonders what she did to deserve to be with someone so perfect.

He senses her staring and turns with a raise of one brow. "Didn't mean to wake you," he says, and he leans over to plant a kiss on her nose. "Go back to sleep."

"You didn't wake me," she whispers, sitting up. The covers slip off her too, and Hisashi's eyes travel down her body in a similar fashion to how Inko's are to him.

"Oh," he says then, grinning cheekily, "so I obviously didn't tire you out enough then."

She laughs and scolds him for the comment, slapping his shoulder. It's firm, and she lets her hand linger on the muscle for a few moments more. He uses the opportunity to take her palm and kiss the center of it. The touch sends tingles down her spine, and she shivers. She swears she'll never get used to it.

"I wish you could stay for longer," she says breathily, sinking back into the mattress with exhaustion pulling at her. She doesn't know when the last time Hisashi was able to sleep in with her was. She usually wakes up in the morning for work and finds him gone.

Although he does make up for it with flowers and gifts and all the love she could ever imagine.

He sighs at her words and sits back down. Inko wants to tell him that he doesn't have to continue talking with her, that he can start getting ready for work by first putting his clothes on—he must certainly be cold—but he speaks before she can get the chance. "I know. Believe me, I do as well. But I work this hard now so that in the future we'll have more time together than we'll know what to do with." He cranes his neck to present her with a warm smile. "We could do anything, anything you want. And we'll have it all."

She smiles back at him, and she doesn't doubt it for a second.

Inko is reaching into the fridge to get something when he walks behind her after coming home early from work one day in December. He presses himself against her, resting his chin on the top of her head, and wraps his arms around her. His hands settle on her stomach, just keeping her close, and she relaxes into him, drinking in the smell of his light Givenchy cologne. It's an old scent, but she likes it a lot. It always makes him smell so fresh.

She tips her head, and she catches their reflection in the mirror hanging by the dining table. He's looking at them too, seemingly deep in thought, but then his gaze meets hers and he flashes those whites.

Here, in the quiet of their humble apartment, Inko can't remember how she used to live before meeting him.

It's not until a couple of weeks later that she finds out she's pregnant. She's always had medical troubles, so it wasn't obvious to her at first that the seemingly minor issues she was having the few weeks before were actually due to pregnancy.

She was scared—no, downright *terrified.* It's not like it was planned! Sure, they're usually safe, but they didn't take *every* precaution available, and sometimes she *wanted* him to—

The point is, she didn't expect it when she saw the second line slowly appear on the pregnancy test that Mitsuki insisted she try. Her heart dropped to her toes, and she was frozen on that cold toilet seat, not sure what to think. She was there for hours, her head in her hands, legs shaking.

She and Hisashi have never really brought up the topic of children before. It just never came up. She knows Hisashi is good with kids, at least as far as she can tell, but he's never come off as the fatherly type to her—just as how Inko wouldn't consider *herself* the motherly type.

So, she keeps it from him for another few days until she's absolutely sure. She takes three more tests during that time, and at that point there is no denying it.

She can't delude herself any longer.

She works up her courage after dinner once Hisashi comes back inside after a break for fresh air on their balcony. He takes them a lot more often these days, but she can't say she doesn't blame him.

She doesn't know how to say it, if there even is a good way to bring it up, so she doesn't waste effort in putting together a little surprise or anything. Mitsuki did that to Masaru when she found out she was pregnant a few months back, but Inko isn't so sure it would be well received for her if she did it to Hisashi.

What if he adamantly refuses to have this baby with her? Her doctor told her on the phone that she must be at *least* six weeks in already if her symptoms have anything to say about it. She has an appointment next week for the confirmation and initial prenatal visit, and she's anxious beyond belief.

If Hisashi is upset, what will she do? He's never been anything other than supportive of her, so she knows that, logically, she shouldn't be *scared,* but this is about a *baby!*

They're both relatively young. They're stable, they have nice jobs, a nice apartment, and they're even married! They *could* have a child, but do they *want one?*

Should they have one?

She's so consumed by these thoughts that when Hisashi puts his hand on her shoulder and asks if she's alright, she just blurts it out: those two words. She must be hard to understand at first, because Hisashi says nothing for a moment, so Inko reaches behind herself to grab the little box of her cleaned tests to hand to him. She's shaking so badly she nearly drops it, but Hisashi takes it from her before she can.

"You're pregnant," he states, and there's something about the way he says it—so normally, so nonchalantly—that makes Inko pause.

She swallows. "Yes." Hisashi's facial expression doesn't change, and he honestly doesn't look perturbed at all. This makes her heart beat fast out of her chest. "Did you… Did you already know?"

He carefully sets the box back on the table. “You’ve been acting differently the last few weeks,” is all he says, the ghost of a smile flitting across his face. “And you know how well I can sense things.”

These words cause Inko to deflate. She sits down and presses a hand to her forehead, relieved that Hisashi doesn’t seem to be angry or worried.

“Are you happy about this?” Hisashi asks, a note of caution in his voice when he kneels to look her in the eye.

“I don’t know,” she rasps. “Are you?”

He holds her hands tight, but never to the point of pain. “Of course I’m happy. But only if you want to do this.”

She wipes her eyes, feeling a sob bubble up in her throat. “I thought you said kids can be too much for you sometimes.”

“Not if it’s yours,” he whispers, and his hands are on her cheeks now, making her look at him. “I’d love anything if it’s ours.”

His promise, his burning intensity, melts away nearly all of her fears. She’s never entertained the idea of being a mother before, but having Hisashi beside her makes her feel as though she was always meant to do this. Only with him. Only now.

She doesn’t see the warning signs. She doesn’t notice the slight edge to his voice, the high-pitched sound ringing faintly in her ears.

They talk it over a few more times over the next week, and Inko finds that she is okay with it. She’s *more* than okay. She’s happy and so, so excited.

She can’t wait to tell Mitsuki that, if things go right, their kids will grow up together just like they did.

The next month passes by quickly, and Inko is only allowed glimpses of it using Mukawa’s quirk.

New technology allows Inko to find out the gender of the baby at only three months: a boy.

Hisashi is ecstatic, of course. Inko is, too, especially since Mitsuki’s little baby boy, Katsuki, is set to be due soon. Everything is falling into place.

Inko never imagined it could all crumble so fast.

One evening, Hisashi has a small, bloody scar on his forehead when he arrives home. Inko is confused, her lips pushing up into a frown while she chops up vegetables for an easy stew. “What happened? Another door slammer?”

“You can say that.”

“Tell me the guy actually apologized this time around?” She says, rolling her eyes playfully.

Hisashi hasn’t taken his coat off yet, and he’s still in his work shoes. His words, usually light or full of mirth, are uncharacteristically blunt and almost sharp. “Not at first.”

“Oh, yeah?” She teases, eyes twinkling with mischief. “What did you do to him? Give him a lecture?”

“I killed him.”

She snorts and shakes her head, waving away the obvious joke. “Honestly, with how rude everyone is these days, I wouldn’t blame you for scolding him. Someone has to do it to teach these people how to be polite—especially in the workplace. I swear, my job just keeps hiring the most awful people ever. The trainees were so rude to me today.”

She laughs at herself and flips one of the fried fish sandwiches she’s making. Her cravings have been driving her crazy! She puts it on a plate and moves to hand it to him, happy that he came home in time for a hot snack–only to see he hasn’t moved from the mouth of the kitchen. He’s staring at her belly, eyes dark.

She blinks, the plate heating up in her swollen hands. “Babe, you okay?” His eyes flick up, and his hollow expression scares her for a moment. She flinches, concerned more than she is confused now. She sets the plate off to the side. “Did you get your head checked out? You might have a concussion. You know, you always go on about how strong you are, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get hurt.”

One of his hands lifts, and she notices just how red and irritated it looks. His pale skin, usually unblemished, is now covered in welts and… and *dried blood.*

She takes hold of his large wrist, worry settling into her stomach. Her

abdomen aches, but her pain is forgotten with the situation at hand. “You should’ve at least washed your hands before leaving work! How many things have you touched on the way–”

His other hand rests over hers and brings it up to kiss her knuckles, cutting off her words. The casual intimate affection isn’t new, but the look on his face is. “I wasn’t joking,” he says, and the words have a kind of melancholic hum to them.

“What?” She asks, not liking the sudden dip in temperature around them. She steps back to continue watching the other fish frying on the stove, slapping his shoulder softly. “If this is another prank of yours, I’m—”

“Sweetheart,” he interrupts, which is so unlike him that Inko finds herself shutting up immediately. “I killed him.”

Looking back at this moment seems easier from an outsider’s perspective. Here, Inko is not inside of her body. She is an onlooker. She stands between Hisashi and her younger self, entirely invisible, frozen, and so, so broken.

The sting of betrayal would be harmless if it killed the love along with it, but it’s never that easy. Even now, for the current Inko, there may still be some deposits of love inside her with her wretched husband’s fake name on it. Even now, rewatching everything through someone else’s eyes, through wiser eyes, Inko doesn’t blame herself for not believing Hisashi at first.

Who would? *Why* would she think he’s not just pulling her leg? He always loved his jokes. How could this have been any different? God, she didn’t want it to be any different.

She stares at Hisashi here, open-mouthed, confused. She’s drawn tight between trust and devastation, not knowing which way to turn.

How could such horrid words come from such a soft mouth?

“He didn’t slam the door on me,” Hisashi adds almost as an afterthought. “He actually didn’t do anything to me at all.”

She hesitates before laughing, and it sounds dull to the ear. “What are you talking about? You really did hit your head hard or something to be talking like—”

Inko’s hair lifts off her shoulders, and she sucks in a breath at the

exact moment that white electricity erupts from Hisashi's index finger. She can feel the heated energy even from her spot five feet away, and it's so intense that she falls backward in her haste to get away from it. But something invisible pushes her back upright from behind, and her wild eyes find Hisashi again once she straightens against the counter, realizing that he had his hand out in a gesture.

"How—How did you—" Her realization is a sucker punch to the throat. All of the puzzle pieces from before click into place: the long hours away from home, the random, frequent business trips, the occasional blood she'd see or smell on his clothes, the glow around his body at night, the enhanced senses, his nearly inhuman strength—and now all of this? They were all things that didn't seem that important by themselves, but now that she's looking at them altogether, Inko feels incredibly stupid.

Because there is no way that all of the abilities Hisashi is showing are a side effect of his fire breath. Are these… *multiple quirks?*

He reads her mind. "I wanted the power he had," Hisashi states, bringing the electricity back to his palm where he clenches his fist and snuffs it out. "So, I took it. There's nothing more to it than that."

"You took it?" She repeats, and it's as though Inko can physically feel the delicate pieces of herself begin to break away and fall to the occupied space of her abdomen.

"I killed him for it."

Inko's mouth opens and closes like a broken hinge. *Why?* She wants to ask, but she isn't quite ready to even accept his confession. If she asks why, that would mean she believes it. That would mean that this house, this life of theirs, and everything they've made together, will have to end.

Despite her refusal, their years of love are forgotten, all in one dreadful moment.

Hisashi must know this, too, must have foreseen this happening, for he lets out a quiet little breath and looks to the ceiling. "It isn't my intention to make you upset. I only want to be truthful."

"Truthful? How is this—?" She pulls away from him when he reaches for her, and her back is against the kitchen wall now, blocking out the warm light coming in from the window. "Where did this come from?"

Please, she thinks instead, *tell me this is a stupid joke. Tell me you haven't been doing this since we first met. Tell me that this wasn't all a lie. Tell me we can still have each other.*

Who is this monster standing before her? This is not her husband. Her husband wouldn't be able to do any of the atrocities Hisashi admits to committing in the minutes of silence spanning between them. He *shouldn't* be able to.

Her husband's name is Midoriya. It is not Shigaraki. Her husband has the ability to spew firebreath. He should not be able to give and take other people's quirks at will. No, her husband is not like this. This is not him, surely.

Inko does not remember the rest of that day. Her mind must have blocked it out entirely, and unfortunately the memories cannot be retrieved even with Mukawa's quirk.

Her brain needed to protect her, it needed to keep her safe so she could take care of her baby, so it blocked out the way she stood there, frozen, disbelieving at first, confused and scared and everything in between.

She was waiting for an explanation that would eventually come—one she would regret asking for in many ways.

Somewhere in the midst of the smoke in her mind, Hisashi says something about loving her, about wanting to keep her safe. He wanted to *spare* her from what he was planning to do in the future. He says that he'll make her his without question, without hesitation, if she'd still have him.

She can't even respond. Are there words in any of the known languages that could possibly convey what she is feeling?

Inko wants him out more and more as he explains who he is in ways she doesn't appreciate.

He tells her, somewhere in the middle of his traitorous explanations, that he has a kid, and she feels this weird pang in her chest when he says it, because this is the first she's hearing of it, and *God,* was he ever really in love with her at all? Was any of it ever real?

How is it that Hisashi could tell her all the reasons to love herself but then show her why she shouldn't? She'd like to say she felt nothing after this point, but that wouldn't be quite true. If she felt nothing,

why would she be shaking so badly?

Oh, how many times has he touched her body with hands that were stained with someone else's blood just minutes before? *How many?*

Inko presses her nails into her skin, her tears working to blur the image that is Hisashi's sad, sad expression in front of her.

He talks to her, and she listens, though she doesn't want to. It is unbearable to hear of all the things he's done and plans to do. It is shameful, it is heart wrenching, and she should scream. She should yell at him, lose her shit, maybe cry more, do *something,* anything. But she doesn't.

Midoriya Inko—and what a godawful name that is now—only sinks to the floor on her legs, one hand on the cabinets beside her and the other on her stomach.

Her thoughts collect dust like the feelings she once had.

Inko does not have to ask for Hisashi to leave. He does it himself. He is quiet still, nearly apologetic, but not once do the words *I'm sorry* actually leave his lips. It is fine, she did not want an apology anyway. Not from him. Not from anyone.

He tells her before leaving their apartment that he already knew how this would end—he knew it from the beginning. But he was just so infatuated with her, so in *love,* that for the first time in three *centuries…* he had forgotten what his plan was.

As unbelievable as it sounds, Inko—tragic, young, *mortal* Inko—threw the devil off of his course.

If only for a few years. If only for a small stretch of time.

It wasn't enough for Inko, and that's the selfish part. Could he have hidden it a little longer? Could he have let her live a lie for just a couple more years? What would've been so hard about that? It would've been for their *son,* for her, for *them.*

Inko would've done anything if it meant Hisashi had never told her the truth, if they could live their false reality for a little while longer at least.

In the years where Hisashi was hers, Inko thought they were infinite. She guesses it was her fault for believing those childish thoughts of

hers.

That is not the last time they see each other. For the next week following the first confession, he returns to her for a few hours each day, late at night, in attempts to soothe her.

She cannot call the police, as she knows it would be in vain. Hisashi told her himself too.

Besides, he's never actually physically hurt her before. Even now, he keeps his hands to himself.

He explains to Inko that he came out with the truth so abruptly because he didn't want to hurt her anymore than he already had. He felt guilty when she became pregnant, and he claimed he couldn't bear to let her raise their son with him without knowing who he really was. When Inko doesn't reply or say a goddamn word, he accepts it.

He doesn't argue. He only says he'll always be available for her if she ever needs him again, and that he wishes things could've been different for them.

Why are you the one leaving? Inko remembers thinking to herself those nights after he left, her blood boiling and her teeth shattered. *Why couldn't I have left sooner? Why did I ever stick with you? God, it'd be so much easier to leave than be the one left behind.*

They don't divorce, although she does try—multiple times. He manages to block all advances, however, as he is adamant she will need the financial support once she gets into the later months with the baby. She doesn't want his bloody money, but he says to take it to save up for Izuku, and so Inko does.

They're legally together, sure. But personally? Emotionally? To Inko, they are anything but.

Five nights after that horrible day, Hisashi visits her for what she thinks is the final time. He will not talk to her again in person for years, though she doesn't know this then.

This time, he is not alone.

Inko stares into the red eyes of a small boy, maybe four or five years old. He has curly white hair, much like Hisashi, and a small mole on the right side of his bottom lip. Hiding some ways behind Hisashi's tall legs, the child peeks out at her a few times in curiosity.

“Tomura,” Hisashi prompts, “say hello.”

As Inko stares, horror spreading all across her skin, the young boy creeps out, his gloved hands kept to himself.

He looks so defeated, so *lost,* that Inko has to turn her entire body away so Tomura—and what a horrible name for such a young, innocent child, Inko thinks bitterly—won’t see her tears. She puts her hand over her face, shivers wracking her entire body,

“Hi,” the little boy mumbles behind her, and when she turns back around, hot tears streaming down her face, he’s not looking at her. He’s shifting on his tiny feet, eyes dull and skin flaky.

There are bruises on his face and scarring around his eyes, and Inko’s heart clenches.

She meets Hisashi’s eyes above the little boy’s matted hair, fists clenched by her side. *Did you do this?* She wants to accuse. *Is this all of your doing? He looks just like you. You can’t tell me it was just a coincidence.*

But what comes out instead is: “He’s yours?”

The words are almost mean. Almost.

“Now he is,” Hisashi answers, all buttery smoothness. “His quirk’s first activation ended in an unfortunate tragedy, so he lives with me now.” His red eyes pierce through Inko. “I’m the only one he can’t hurt. You must understand this was a necessity.”

Why is he defending himself? Why is he even bothering with this?

Why *show* her?

She kneels and very carefully takes Tomura’s cheeks between her hands. He doesn’t try to pull away even though he flinches. Hisashi’s leg is pressed against his back, keeping him there, and Tomura’s face softens substantially at her touch.

His eyes close, and Inko focuses on his long, dark eyelashes. Beneath the bruises, she can see fresh, angry red scratches all over his face, no doubt from clawing fingernails.

And in this split second, Inko sees a life they could’ve had somewhere, sometime that is not now, that is not within her grasp. She is holding

Tomura's hand, leading him happily through some festival in traditional clothing. Beside them, Hisashi has Izuku hoisted up on his shoulders, and the boy is beaming brightly.

Why couldn't it be this simple? Why did Hisashi have to be who he was? She still, to this day, can't make sense of any of it.

Tomura's mere existence nauseates her, and yet she wants to keep him. She almost wants to ask. *Just let me have him,* she'd say. *Let me have this boy and Izuku, and I'll never ask for anything else. I'll have him if you'll leave us alone. Please.*

But All for One's hold on Tomura is tight, even then. And Inko is so fucking sorry to be the one on the sidelines, unable to do anything.

If she fights against Hisashi, would it put Izuku at risk? It would certainly put Tomura in danger. How many would die if she went for help? How many heroes would she sacrifice needlessly? If she keeps quiet, it will save Izuku. She knows it will.

Her silence will kill so many more, however, and this is a fact. But that will have to be fine with Inko.

For the remainder of her pregnancy, she is almost always with Mitsuki or Masaru. She helps Mitsuki with her postpartum struggles, and she loves baby Katsuki as if he were her own. Because, in some ways, he is.

As she nears the end, she began to think more and more about everything. It is getting darker earlier, and her bones are shuttering like blinds on a window inside her. She only wanted to be someone who was easy to love, but now she is barely someone. It was all working out until it wasn't, until the sparks died out and the cold returned with a vengeance.

She hasn't been able to convince anyone she's in this life for the long haul.

"You'll be fine," Mitsuki promises one time when Inko is at her house, and she's holding Inko's face with strong hands. "Trust me. Just stay by us, and you can get through all of it."

And Inko wishes she could say that she wants to stay and mean it. She wishes she could *want* to stay.

She thinks entirely too much on what their relationship was like. She

tries to see what she missed. All those times he was away, out on a quick business trip—he was out killing. He was hunting for quirks. That's what.

It was her fault. She was a participant despite her not knowing.

Whenever she remembers his face, he looks different. Each time, she can't seem to remember him accurately. His red eyes don't look like roses anymore. They look like the blood dripping down her palms on the days where her nails dig in too deep. His soft smile holds no warmth. She only notices the sharp lines formed from the action, the leery glint to his eye that accompanies it.

Inko obsesses over it.

The worst part is that she can't tell Mitsuki any of this. No one knows why they broke apart. Only that Midoriya Hisashi lied to her about *something,* and so Inko had to leave. She never tells a soul about what really happened.

And that is something she will take to her unfortunate grave.

If she tells anyone, especially someone like Mitsuki, she is nearly positive that they'd be hurt. He already warned her that if she did so, they'd only get in the way, and he'd have to remove them. The meaning was clear then, and it still is.

Inko loathes herself the entire time. She hates herself for bringing a kid into the world with the blood of a very real monster. But maybe it was fitting, she thinks. She couldn't have borne anything else.

But when little Izuku arrives, Inko thinks differently. She cried every day the last few months of her pregnancy, thinking she would have the boy and not love him. That she'd turn out just like Hisashi and lie to him his entire life, making him think she loved him when she didn't.

She was wrong. She does love him. *By God,* does she. After Mitsuki helps her through the difficult hours of labor, she holds her son close to her chest in that hospital and gives him the name his father picked out—the last thing Inko *ever* promised Midoriya Hisashi.

Although it's not like she had any choice in the matter.

Midoriya Izuku was never supposed to be born. All for One was never supposed to have a kid. There is a cyclone raging outside during the

time of his birth, and she knows the storm is the world rejecting him entirely, but she doesn't care then, because soon after, Izuku's eyes open, and they're a striking green, not red. They're *green,* God, the most beautiful green, and from then she knew that her son was hers only. He's Inko's, not Hisashi's, and she is going to protect and love this boy until her very last breath.

She swears on it, right there in that hospital bed, covered in her own blood and sweat.

She will never, ever let him go.

As the months pass, Inko's love for him only grows. She loves her son *so much* she thinks that maybe she never really loved Hisashi at all. Because she never loved him as *deeply* as she loves this boy. Has she just forgotten what it felt like to love that man? Or was she always blinded, just as Mitsuki may have feared?

Mukawa's quirk extends deeper, showing Inko more of the kindest memories she has of her and Izuku. She can scarcely believe she managed to forget those first wonderful, *wonderful* four years of his life.

They're walking around the city, and Izuku is swinging his arm back and forth as he walks close by Inko's side. A white moth flutters in front of him, and he points at it with a gasp. Inko smiles down at him, not wanting for him to ever grow out of this curious phase of his. She takes him to work with her sometimes, and her coworkers are nice enough to watch him whenever she's not around. They play little games with him, and Inko used to feel bad about asking them to babysit even if it was for only a few minutes at a time, but they say they don't mind. He's so smart, even for his age. He's just so, so intelligent and caring.

Inko is so lucky.

But there's a weight at the back of her mind even then. How could there not be? She prayed for Izuku to be quirkless. Prayed because it would be better for him to have no power at all instead of having a quirk like his father's.

What are the chances he gets something like her telekinesis? Inko goes to three different quirk specialists to ask for an opinion, and they have no answer for her.

It's a waiting game, and this is perhaps the moment when she starts to

slowly lose herself. It begins small. Only a few bits of her fade away at a time. They get lost to the wind, never to be regained. Eventually, the rate at which things leave her will increase, and it will prove to be inescapable.

She just wants to protect him. She wants to raise Izuku in some semblance of normalcy. She rarely mentions his father to him, but when he asks, it's hard to ignore it. So, she tells him the truth.

Inko tells him the good things. She speaks of his manners, of the roses he'd always bring back to her, of his smile, his kindness, his curly hair that he passed on down to Izuku—she speaks of the Midoriya Hisashi she thought she knew and loved.

And she says nothing more. She feels bad for leaving everything else out, but he's only a child. He won't be able to understand the kind of horrors his father was capable of. He *shouldn't* understand. So, she shoulders the burden. She buries it inside and feels guilt stab at her every second of every day.

What is he doing now? She wonders sometimes. *Killing? Planning more vicious traps for heroes?*

But that is not her responsibility, bitterly enough. Izuku is here beside her, unscathed, and nothing else matters.

She lets it all happen, and she remains quiet, aware but unaware.

Inko, selflessly or selfishly—she doesn't know the difference anymore—puts her little boy, so young and beautiful and kind, *above* the rest of the world.

She prioritizes him over the safety of everyone else. Izuku comes first. Everything else is secondary. She will take the punishment for her crimes as long as her son is alive and loved. That's all she has ever wanted since Hisashi left.

When Izuku is three, Inko begins to calm down just a little. Most children his age have their quirks by now, but Izuku doesn't. Is it horrible of her to wish he'll never activate one at all?

Katsuki develops his quirk, a perfect mixture of his parents' powers, and of course Inko is excited for him—of course she's proud.

She hides her fear when she's around him. She's not scared of her nephew. She's scared of the truth he represents, because sure, Inko

feared that Izuku would develop Hisashi's quirk, but she never thought about what would happen if he got a mixture of her telekinesis and All for One.

Would Hisashi really stay away then?

Raising a boy as intelligent and sweet as Izuku proves to be the most difficult thing she's ever done. It's rewarding, though. That's the weird thing about being a mother: you're the happiest you've ever been, but you'll never be happy again.

And when Izuku's quirk manifests fully the night of his fourth birthday, Inko's nightmares become reality. The pit in her stomach returns—a reminder of the lies she's been feeding her son for breakfast every day of his life. How could she think she could run from it? How naive was she? Of course Izuku is hers, that will never change, but he is also his father's. And that monster of a man left his mark on both of them by giving Izuku the gene he needed to get *his* quirk.

When his arms wrap around her neck in a hug, his palms pressing against the side of her throat, Inko experiences pain like no other. It's an electric wire shooting straight through her body. She doesn't even feel it at first. She sees the blood spurting out first, sees it arc in the air and ruin one of the pictures on the wall. It gets in Izuku's hair, soaks both of their clothes, and that's when Inko burns.

Her screaming alerts the neighbors, and when the ambulance arrives, she makes sure to shield her baby as much as possible.

They can't know. They can never know what he did to her.

Even when she's lying on the dining room floor, twitching and writhing in shock as the blood continues to pour out of her neck, with Izuku wailing and kneeling down right beside her, shaking her—Inko knows that she has to hide him. She has to protect him.

And so, on record, the events of that night are chalked up to a quirk accident on *her* behalf. She used her telekinesis too much, and she accidentally split her skin open, resulting in the gaping wounds. It's believable enough. No one bats an eye.

Who would think that a four-year-old could do so much damage anyway?

Izuku cries the entire time in the hospital. Inko shushes him when she comes to, forcing him to keep quiet about what happened.

And if she's crying too, she hopes this is something Izuku will never have to remember.

But then her little boy puts his chin on the edge of her hospital bed and says with an achy, tremory voice: *"I'm sorry, Mommy, I have it. Mommy, I have it."*

He has it.

Somehow she knew this already, as of course she felt the absence of her quirk before this conversation, but she just didn't want to believe it just yet.

She pulls him up to sit beside her, and she holds him close, her bandages crinkling on her neck. "*I know, baby, I know. It's okay. I'm not mad. I'm not mad."*

Izuku didn't know any better, but at this moment it is a little hard for Inko to control her anger. She hates Hisashi more than anything now. Before, maybe there was something inside her that still longed for him, that still loved the part of him he created just for her.

But now it is gone alongside her quirk. And, by God, she is so angry at the world. And her son, her poor baby, sees her anger and thinks it's because of him. And in a way he's right, but Inko could never blame him for existing. She could never blame him for just wanting to hold her.

She only has herself to blame. For everything.

She tries her best to keep her emotions in check in the months following the incident. Izuku is so hyper-aware of any and all emotions that he can tell she's struggling despite Inko's best attempts to hide it.

He takes it all on himself even at the young age of four years old.

Her life is divided into two parts now: the *before* and *after.* She can't tell which is worse, but what she does know is that her paranoia will be the death of her one of these days.

She flinches when Izuku gets close too suddenly, her skin tingling in preparation for pain, and her heart breaks anew upon seeing the way he moves back, hurt flashing across his expression. She avoids him sometimes without meaning to.

He will come out of his room in the mornings to tell her something, but she is in her bedroom with the door closed.

She must really be losing her mind here. She allowed herself to believe she could stand tall in something that's sinking *without* going under.

And that was too big of an order.

Losing a quirk is trivial to losing a child. That's what Inko repeats to herself on the days where her skin feels wrong. Like it belongs to someone else. Some*thing* else.

To make matters worse, Hisashi is still there: ready and waiting on the sidelines. He has been sending her money monthly ever since their separation, just as he said he would, along with flowers on her birthday and their anniversary. There is never a card, nor a note.

On Izuku's first day of school, though, a few months before he turns five, she receives a small package at her doorstep.

They're emerald earrings. Gorgeous. Expensive. They dangle around a quarter of an inch from her earlobes, and Inko isn't sure what to think.

Inscribed in tiny writing on the side is the character for ***beautiful.***

The shadows become even darker after this day, and she just can't keep it together. He is haunting her every path, her every waking moment. Izuku cries to her some nights about these *urges* that he gets. He can feel his classmates' quirks, and it scares him. It scares him because his body urges him to get a closer look while his mind works to convince him to take them all for himself.

Fear grips him in icy talons, refusing to let him go, and how can Inko ever pretend to be able to help with that?

"I don't wanna hurt 'em," he cries into her chest after a school day. "*What if I hurt 'em like I hurt you?"*

And she holds him tight again, unable to find the words. She feels the absence of her quirk every day. It's something she will likely never get used to, but that's fine. It isn't something crucial to her life. And it's not like it's gone. It's with her *son.*

Why would she hate that?

She doesn't know how to help him. His palms itch terribly, and he creates wounds at the center of them by scratching so much. No creams or steroids help, and no doctor can give her a good referral. She has to force him to wear goddamn *gloves* to stop the constant fresh scabs.

And maybe, deep down, she also does it because she too is scared he might hurt his classmates the same way he did her.

If he did that? There'd be no more hiding. The world would know that Midoriya Izuku, her son, her kind and smart and loving little boy, has the power of living gods.

Would they take him away? Lock him up? Plaster his name on the news? Hisashi told her all of these things were possibilities. He warned her. Specifically, he said that those were all possibilities only *if* she didn't come to him.

So, pushing away her feelings and thinking only of her baby, Midoriya Inko goes to see All for One.

She doesn't need to send a note. She simply walks to the place they frequented for date nights all those years ago. The sun is setting, and the cold is settling in. Izuku is at Mitsuki's for the night, so she doesn't have to worry about where he is.

And Hisashi is there as surely as the sun rises each morning.

By God, he is as beautiful as the day Inko made him leave. For all of his crimes, his lies, his horrifying ideals and plans—he was and still is stunning. He has always been unequivocally handsome.

His red eyes paired with that stark white hair—white like the freshly fallen snow around them—makes him near ethereal. His large build, long eyelashes, square jaw, and perfect lips are telling of an angel in disguise.

She does not smile upon noting these things this time around, however. She only stares, already beginning to shake. A white moth settles on a cherry blossom tree above them, watching quietly.

She swallows hard, now ten feet away from her ex-husband—if she can even call him that—and asks him a simple question: how? How does she help Izuku? How does she raise a boy with a quirk like his? How does she help him deal with the *urges?* She's certain Hisashi must get them, too. So, *how?* How does he not grow crazy?

And Hisashi, to his credit, answers, his voice a soothing rumble. He answers each question about his quirk with incredible detail. He gives her every possible scenario she may come across with Izuku figuring himself out and testing the limits of what he can do. He tells her how to protect him, and the entire time—for maybe eight minutes—Hisashi is unfaltering. He is not shivering. He never shivers as he is never cold with her temperature regulation quirk.

This makes Inko more bitter, since she certainly is. Her jacket isn't enough, and Hisashi moves to help her with green fire in his hand to warm her. Unthinking, Inko slaps the hand away when he gets too close and immediately freezes. The touch between them felt like static, and it's like something switched in her brain.

Here, in the middle of a beautiful vacant park, Inko is terrified without reason. This is a monster who has lived in a human's skin for centuries. Why did she think she could touch him now? Why did she still *trust* him enough to do that?

Hisashi has never laid a hand on her, though, and he doesn't now. The green fire dissipates, and his hand is placed inside his jacket pocket. He is smiling softly at her. There is so much adoration in his eyes that it makes Inko feel sick.

Was I always just a pet to you? Something you could use whenever you needed to relax?

With these thoughts banging around inside her skull, Inko attempts to leave, but his gentle voice stops her. He says her name, and her eyes go to the bustling streets in the distance. Do they know? Do any of them know that she is dealing with the goddamned *devil* right now?

Or is it all in her fucking head like the monsters who follow her around wherever she goes?

"Can you bring him to me?" The question makes her look back at him. He brings a hand up to smooth back his hair, and it almost looks anxious, but he is surely anything but. "I want to see him."

She's sure he's lying. He's already seen her son, most likely. And that's something that nearly paralyzes Inko with fear every day. At school, at Mitsuki's, at the park, at her job, *anywhere,* Hisashi could have eyes on Izuku. And she'd be none the wiser. No one would notice, no one would bat an eye.

There have been days where she swears she felt his presence, where

she swears she heard that deep voice or saw a glimpse in the distance of curly white hair.

Hisashi is so strong he could certainly keep tabs on them without effort, without her permission, but she plays along anyway, because the question has opened up something else inside her. “Why do you care?”

“He is my son.”

Her throat closes, and her shivering worsens. “And I was your *wife.”*

“Yes, and I loved you enough to tell you the truth, my dear.” Hisashi’s head tips forward, eyes piercing into hers. “I will always care for you. That will never change.”

She looks away again, her vision swimming. The pet name—something she would normally enjoy coming from Hisashi’s lips—now makes her feel disgusting and used.

She clutches her jacket and purse even tighter. *No,* she thinks bitterly, *if you really cared about me at all, you would’ve left me alone from the very start.*

But she does not voice these feelings. Instead, she takes a deep, shuddering breath before speaking. “If you ever come near Izuku, if you ever try to take him or—or hurt him,” she says, fresh tears frozen to red cheeks, “you’ll lose both of us. I—I promise you.”

The words have a similar cadence to a law. The meaning is clear between them without her having to outright say it: she will kill Izuku and herself before she’d *ever* let Izuku become his next pet, his next weapon. Yes, Izuku is his father’s, he is also *hers* and it’s *her* fault he has to live this life in fear to begin with. It sounds selfish, immoral, and all the other nasty things you can think of. And it is, truthfully. But Inko knows now with absolute certainty that there is no force in the universe capable of stopping Hisashi from using their son for his quirk or whatever other monstrous plans he has.

He has been showing great mercy by allowing her to raise Izuku uninterrupted so far, and he’s done good on his promise not to hurt the people close to her, but for how long will that last? Inko has not rested for a moment ever since that day.

Most heroes would be useless against him. She’s seen it firsthand—even All Might might not be enough.

So who is standing between Hisashi and Izuku? Inko is, but she knows she will never last.

The only thing she could possibly do to save Izuku from that kind of life is kill him herself. And without him beside her, she has no point to live, so, naturally, she will follow.

With these promises eating away at her, Inko leaves, and Hisashi does not follow.

The shadows taunt her in the weeks following their last meeting. Izuku's fifth birthday comes and goes. She tries to be happy, she tries to make it special, but Izuku doesn't smile, as he remembers his fourth birthday.

When was the last time he smiled brightly? Only at Mitsuki's house. Only with little Katsuki.

Inko is failing him. And this realization invokes a new kind of mania within her.

The shadows begin to speak directly to her. They grow more real with each passing day. They jeer and taunt, blotting out the light. She sees Hisashi—or what was Hisashi, once—everywhere. At every corner, in every window, standing behind her when she looks in the mirror.

Hisashi. Is. In. *Everything.* But the worst part is? He isn't.

She knows she's spiraling. Mitsuki has already noticed something off, and so have her friends from work. Her job thankfully pays for her to go to therapy during the day when Izuku is at school so he won't have to know she is struggling, but it doesn't help.

Because sometimes, in her worst moments, Inko can't convince herself in time that the shadows aren't real.

She has this primal urge to *protect* Izuku from the monsters crowding around her when she's at home. When she's exhausted out of her mind from work, she goes home and begins carrying a knife on her just in case, because now she swears she can physically *feel* the monsters' sharp touches.

She tries to keep going places with Izuku to distract him from how much she's failing. She takes him to hero conventions, she blows money on buying him cute little merchandise of whatever hero he likes that month, and she frequently takes him to eat at restaurants

he's never been to.

But the monsters follow her wherever she goes, and it's worse in public.

"*Ma'am?"* A waitress asks her, her kind eyes peeking out from above her mask as she waits for Inko to answer her previous question.

But Inko is unresponsive. There are sharp jaws about to enclose on the waitress's head from behind, and Inko is not quick enough to stop it when they snap close around her neck. The head is ripped off, and blood sprays out, getting in Inko's eyes.

She sits there, eyes squeezed shut, unmoving. She can still hear the waitress' kind voice, so she knows it's not real, but when Izuku tugs at her sleeve worriedly and makes her open her eyes, there is still blood on the table, and the waitress is speaking to her without a head.

They leave the restaurant without eating.

No amount of medication helps. The doctors do numerous tests, and they even send her to other specialists on the other side of Japan, but they don't have a clue what's wrong with her.

They thought it was schizophrenia, but some things are off about her symptoms, and no treatment has worked for her, so they had to rule it out.

Inko becomes a lost cause.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Masaru asks with a concerned lilt to his voice. They're in the backyard watching Izuku and Katsuki play, but Inko isn't happy.

How is she supposed to be happy when there are monsters playing catch with little Katsuki's limbs?

She never answers Masaru. He doesn't ask again.

The shadows howl at night into her ear, resembling a train whistle. She can't sleep, and she barely eats anymore. She throws open her window one evening out of desperation, trying to usher them out, and they do leave, for the most part.

Only a white moth remains each time, but it doesn't matter, because the monsters always return by morning.

She begins to smoke to help ease her nerves. She can't get away with doing drugs, as her work does regular tests, but she can get away with smoking.

This only forms a new kind of addiction within her. It's a struggle not to let Izuku see.

"Mommy," he says, and the memory turns dark as Inko's vision shifts down to him. "Let go, please."

She blinks, confused, but then sees that she's holding his arm so tightly that her knuckles are white. She releases him with a jolt and immediately picks him up to hug. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," she says, horrified, unsure of what else she could do to possibly make it up to him.

"It's okay," he whispers into her shoulder. "It's okay, Mommy. I forgive you."

But it's not, it's not okay, and it never will be, because things come to their peak one hot Summer day a few weeks before Izuku turns six.

On this day, she snaps, and things are never the same again.

The shadows scratch at her while she attempts to make dinner. She's had such a long, painful day, that when the various sleek black creatures corral her, chittering loudly enough to hurt her ears, she loses what little patience she has left.

She grabs the closest thing: a wine bottle gifted to her from Mitsuki. When there's a new unwelcome touch on her leg, she doesn't think, she just *does.*

The bottle goes flying, hitting something solid, and it's not until the creatures go still and quiet that she realizes what she's done.

Izuku is on the ground a few feet away, scrambling away from her. Shards of thick glass are littered on the tile, cutting into his skin. Red wine soaks his clothes and body, making him shiver. She stares, mouth dropped open, mind momentarily empty.

He has a cut on the left side of his jaw, spanning so deep that she *swears,* she swears she sees white. Blood drips down his cheek, mixing with the sangria, and she is terrified.

What did she just *do?*

She stumbles back as the shadows intensify again, forming crazed faces that work to hiss at her. It grows into screeching, and Inko can't hear.

Everything is secondary to her horror.

Izuku recovers faster than he should've. He sees her face and seems to break. "No," he gasps out, trying to stand back up. "No! You didn't hurt me! You didn't hurt me, Mommy! I swear! See! I'm—I'm not hurt!" He slips and slides back into the glass. His hitch of breath in pain hurts Inko physically, and she jerks forward as if to help, but she's forced to jump back when the shadows advance, getting in between them.

This time, however, they don't look like they're hurting him. No, they're not tearing him apart like they would other people, like they would Inko—they're *protecting* Izuku. They form a line in front of him, keeping him away—no, keeping *Inko* away.

Her eyes glaze over. All this time, has she been seeing it wrong? Who has been the aggressor? The violent one?

She hurt Izuku. The shadows never have. *Hisashi* never hurt him. The painful truth is that the shadows are only ever at their worst when she's near Izuku. They've been crowding around Izuku, always Izuku, *never* her.

They have been *protecting* him!

God, she can't do this anymore. She promised Hisashi that day that she would kill Izuku before ever allowing Hisashi to get him—why did she *ever* think she had the right to say that? Why did she ever *promise?*

In Izuku's nearly six years of life, Inko is the only one to have hurt him so badly.

She doesn't realize she's moving towards the door with the monsters encouraging her out until Izuku begins to sob, back on his knees. "No, Mommy! No, don't leave! Stay! Stay, please! Mommy, *please stay!"*

Inko's mind and body are torn into two. She doesn't have the words to tell Izuku the truth. She doesn't know how to get him to understand. He's still so young that even though he's intelligent, he would never get it.

Maybe she doesn't want him to get it.

“I can’t,” she thinks she says to him in the end. *“I can’t, baby.”*

“No! Mommy, don’t leave me—!”

So, Inko leaves her boy behind with the shadows who perhaps were never the monsters in the first place. She rushes out, ignoring his wailing even though she has never felt so monstrous before in her life.

When she makes it out of their wretched apartment and into the pouring rain, she wants out. She can’t handle the memory onslaught anymore, it’s just as her counselor said. She can’t manage to see any of this anymore.

The heart has its own memory, and Inko has forgotten nothing now.

So, Mukawa pulls her out.

Chapter End Notes

> the world is spinning faster than i remember and i cannot seem to catch up. why can’t it let me get my bearings first? i am not sisyphus anymore, i am his boulder
>
> afo and inko’s height difference is actually diabolical. at first i tried not to mention his size too many times but then i realized that it’s something u can’t really ignore upon first meeting him (mf is bigger than all might) so i just said fuck it and went all in. be honest, would you have fallen for him too in her shoes? also afo has drip so ofc he wears givenchy
>
> i thought it was a very afo thing to do to wait until your wife was a few months pregnant to tell her you're a mass-murdering supervillain as a side hustle
>
> e
>
> [image]

End Notes

thank you

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!